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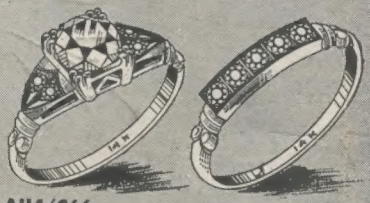

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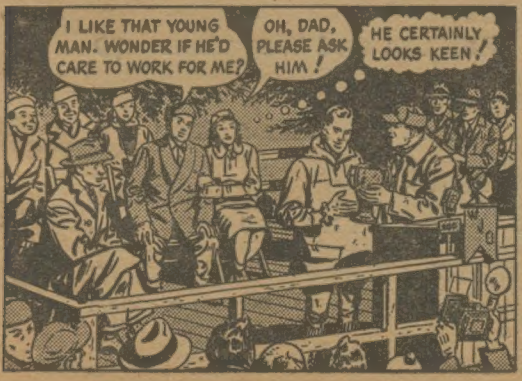

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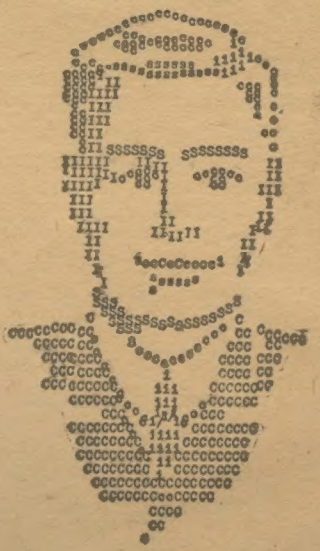

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WE'VE always heard that Texans could top any story you could tell them. It wasn't until the other day, though, that we heard how one intrepid Texan-by-choice bettered the record of that old marksman, William Tell. And the remarkable part of it is that the yarn is as true as a Texas bluebonnet. Here are the facts, as told by Jimmy Nichols, one of our regular reader-editors:

Nearly a hundred curious heads, about half of them in sunbonnets, popped out of the wagons to have a look at the new town of Skyville. The prospect was not pleasing. A smooth-talking land-shark had passed through their stony, rock-ribbed section of Vermont last fall and sold them this slice of Texas, sight-unseen. To the thirty cold, impoverished farming families it had sounded like a land of milk and honey. Digging deep, they had bought the valley and chosen slow-spoken, pious Caleb Brewster to lead them.

It had never occured to the honest Vermonters that the stranger might be lying. Now they saw that he had neglected to mention the fact that the valley was already planted in acres of scrub cactus, and the "municipal buildings" were mere huts.

But these were descendants of the same hardy settlers who had landed at Plymouth Rock, and they had sold their farms. There was no turning back for them.

Soon the Vermont plows were biting into the sun-soaked Rio Grande soil and the valley rang to the sound of hammers. By the end of the first growing season, there was a neat, white-painted, thriving town surrounded by wide black acres of rich farmland. Skyville was doing all right.

But the smell of money drifted to the world outside, and those who were sensitive to the clink of gold began to follow it downwind. The newcomers were not the most desirable types of Texans. By the early winter of 1873, the notorious gambler, Pike Davis, had moved in from El Paso and opened two faro houses. Backed by twenty gunmen, Davis soon ruled Skyville.

Caleb Brewster was a patient man. With furrowed brows he watched his promised land become a cheap and bawdy boom-town.

In a stormy interview, he served a last warning on Pike Davis. "I'm calling in the Rangers to clean your filth out of here."

Davis was calm. "By whose authority?"

Caleb waved the deed to Skyville in his face. "You forgot," he roared, "that we Vermonters own this town!"

"Do you?" purred Davis silkily. "Well, maybe we can arrange a little trade!"

What the gambler meant was soon tragically clear. Really frightened by Brewster's threat, he had his men surround the school house and kidnap Oren, Caleb's six-year-old boy, right out of the classroom.

"I'll trade your youngster's life—for that deed to Skyville," Pike Davis told the shaken father. Caleb Brewster was licked. He started, slowly for the gambler's headquarters, carrying the precious deed.

He could not get in to see Pike Davis. An angry mob surrounded the faro house. Five of the gambler's henchmen were swinging from nearby trees.

Then the door opened and Pike Davis walked out, white-faced but still self-assured. Oren Brewster in his arms. Using the child as a shield, he walked rapidly through the crowd, up the steep-sided valley into the desert.

Caleb suddenly threw his rifle to his shoulder. The crowd gasped. Several women screamed. His sights covered both the gambler and his son. It was a long chance—it was hardly a chance at all. His wife looked at him steadily, and he pressed the trigger once, with unshaken faith.

The fleeing man, with the boy in his arms, fell. Then only the boy rose from the sand and began to run back!

With only the barest show of reverence, they buried Pike Davis where he fell.

That's a mighty interesting vignette of Lone Star history, Jimmy. Such men as Caleb Brewster were the real backbone of the old West. And it's stories of men of Caleb Brewster's stripe that we will continue to seek out and print in the pages of *Ace-High Western Stories,* each month.

The next issue will be published February 26th! *THE EDITOR*

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THE SIXGUN CIVILIZERS

CHAPTER ONE

Cavalry Spells Terror

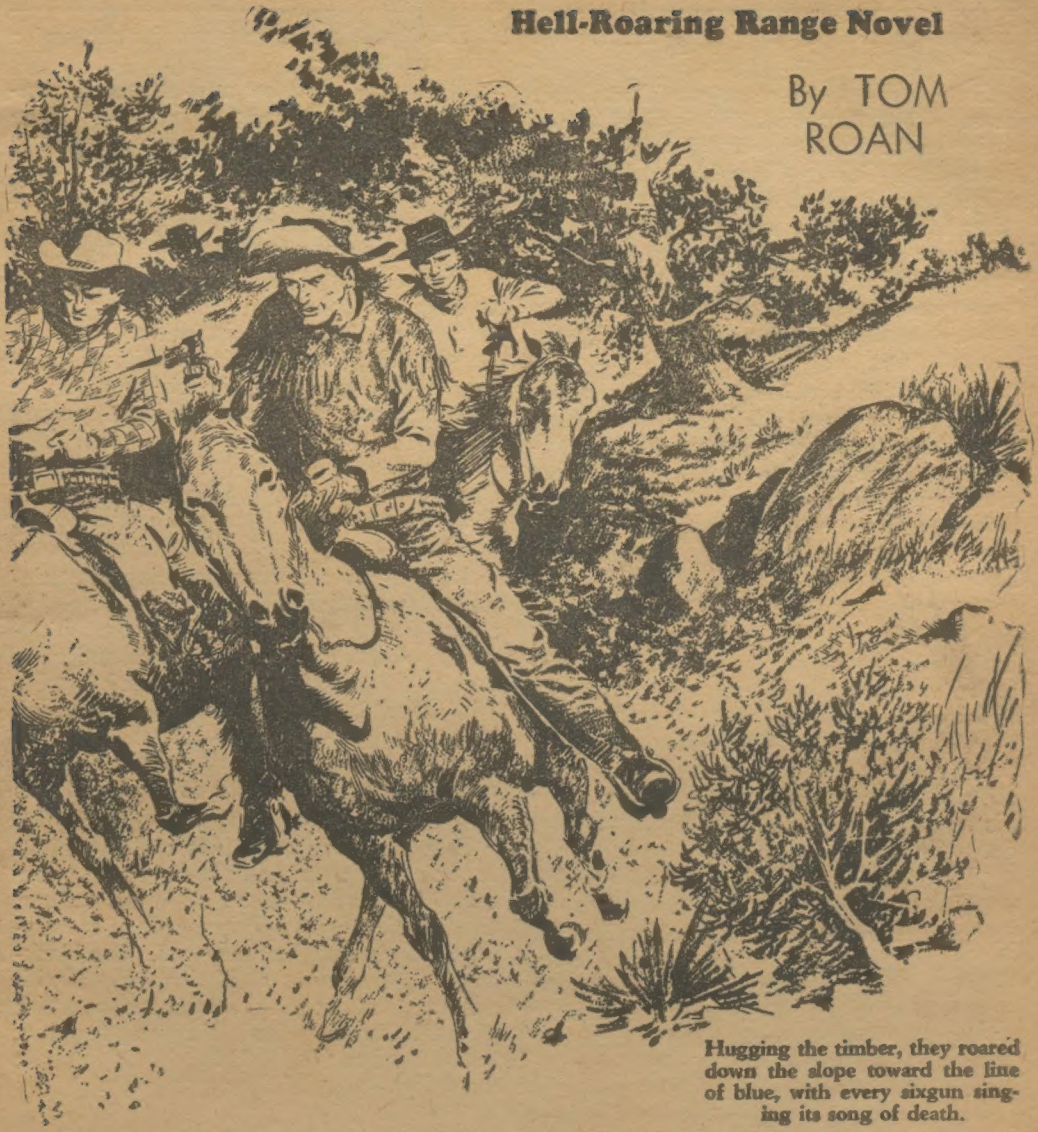
DUST HUNG over the broad valley that late spring afternoon, a great veil of it, in the still air above the cottonwoods along the creek. Below it, plodding along in a huge cloud, was a tremendous Texas trail herd, four thousand head of prime beef cattle on the move. The flank riders gave them plenty of room, the four big wagons and the horse herd followed, and everything appeared to move at a snail's pace in the lowering sunlight.

It was one of the best herds to come north in the late '70's, and a man could be proud

Into Bloodtown, rodding a mighty herd of four thousand prime steers, rode Sam Hathway and his reckless, trigger-happy gang of Texans. But those longhorns had to wait until Sam played one last showdown game with Skull Shanlon, gun-king of frontier Wyoming's deadliest killer-pack, for a six-by-three Boothill claim, or a fabulous golden fortune!

Hell-Roaring Range Novel

By TOM ROAN



Hugging the timber, they roared down the slope toward the line of blue, with every sixgun singing its song of death.

of it; yet Sam Hathway was heading it straight for the meanest, crookedest town in Wyoming. That would be Bloodtown, still another long day's slow-poke ahead.

A mile ahead of the herd, Sam was already looking for his bedground, and it lay before him under the shadow of a big hogback reaching down from the east wall of the valley to the creek. Here on a big flat east of the creek the herd would be brought into a gentle mill and bunched in the deep grass. Then the supper fire would blaze between the long wagons, and afterwards the men would get a much-needed rest while the nighthawks watched over the herd. And tomorrow *Bloodtown!*

Mounted on a splendid black, Sam was long and lean himself and only in his thirtieth year despite a life that overflowed with adventure. His sense of humor had not deserted him and he could still smile at certain parts of the out-and-out licking he had taken in Bloodtown three years ago.

In addition to knocking him down for a cold sixty thousand dollars in cash, Bloodtown had also murdered his men, four of the best cowboys ever to fork saddles, shooting them from the dark and leaving no

hide or trace of their killers. Sam could not laugh about that.

Some of that old score would probably be settled on this trip. Rook Gentry, notorious rake from the Mississippi to San Francisco's Golden Gate, had taught Sam a lot about crooked cards and dice; and when it came to burning powder he now had some of the best, the most reckless and deadly gun-lawyers in the West among the twenty two men behind him—and not a one who would not go to hell for him at the slightest hint of trouble.

Waving his handkerchief to the riders behind to indicate the bedground, Sam rode on for the top of the hogback. An experienced man always took a look at the surrounding country from some high place before getting settled in a camp, and especially when getting to within a few miles of bloody Bloodtown.

With many herds pouring north, the white rustler was always on the move, often backed by small armies of Indian renegades who came swooping down at night to stampede herds. A true stampede usually kept in a bunch, but when they were scattered the owners could rarely collect them all, and there was where the rustler made his roundups after the main herd had gone on.

But thoughts of rustlers left him and a glow of surprise filled his face when he reached the crest of the hogback and pulled up in a little fringe of low pines. He remembered now that a settlement of sorts had been started on the grassy, high banks of the creek a thousand yards below the crest by a sprinkling of Ohio Valley men, with little more than their bare hands to throw up homes, build fences and start trying to wrest a living from the soil. Even the rude signboard nailed to a tree had been none too optimistic when it had called the place Pioneer, for pioneers often failed.

And yet pioneers often did win out, and the proof of it was here, stretching for a good two miles up the valley and reaching from valley wall to valley wall. The settlement itself was in the original spot, but it had grown beyond all expectations and hopes. About sixty neat log, stone and adobe houses were down there on the east bank, lined along an equally neat street. A church had gone up in the square where a wagon bridge crossed the creek. Next to it stood a fairly large general store and a blacksmith shop.

All around Pioneer now stretched carefully tended and fence-railed fields, many of them green with young grain coming out of the ground. In other places men were plowing with oxen, mules or horses. It was the most peaceful scene Sam Hathway had seen since leaving Texas.

Pioneer was alive, up and coming, going to be a real community in another year or two. Even from the distance there was a happy look about the place: children playing in the square, smoke rising from the evening fires where women were cooking real meals for their menfolk. And then the tranquility was suddenly shattered by three shots and a clanging of bells in the top of a towering cottonwood a mile up the creek.

Instantly, there was terror in the settlement. Men in their fields turned like startled animals to flee back toward the settlement. Some quickly unhitched mules or horses from their plows, jumped astride with traces flying, and headed for the town. Those with slower oxen left them yoked to their plows and took to their heels, running toward the town as if all hell was just behind them.

Sam Hathway could not understand it. It was like a settlement suddenly going crazy for no reason at all—men yelling, children fleeing and crying, women screaming as if about to be murdered. The blacksmith's hammering anvil-ring ceased with a clatter, and out of the shop came the smith himself, forge-blackened apron flapping, hat in hand and his bald head shining as he raced for the doubtful sanctuary of a nearby house.

Down from the tall cottonwood now came the man who had fired the shots and rung the bells that had started it all. Jumping astride an old horse, he headed for town—and then, more amazed than ever, Sam Hathway saw what looked like an ordinary troop of cavalry breaking from a wall of scrub-timber a mile beyond the last field and coming down the valley at a thundering gallop.

Cavalry, as far as Sam Hathway knew, had never startled any white settler; cavalry was always a welcome sight, but for some crazy reason that galloping line of horsemen only brought terror to Pioneer.

"WHUT'N HELL does it mean, Sam? Damned if, it don't look like them aim to fire on the whole settlement!"

Long and red-headed old Dave Brady, a buckskinned hellion faster than light on the draw and as sure as sunrise on the kill, was the first to gallop up to Sam's side. Behind him on a big roan followed Phil Harmony, a wide-chested bull of a man, black-haired as a crow and also buckskinned.

The troopers in the distance had fanned out as if getting ready for a charge. All Pioneer had grown quiet by this time. Doors were closed, and not a man, woman or child remained in sight. It was as though Pioneer was waiting for the first charge of an Indian attack.

"An' such things have been done by the Army!" A growl had come into Phil Harmony's tone.

"There she goes!" Dave Brady pointed at mushrooming cloud of gunsmoke below. "Soldiers openin' up! It looks like they've come for a wipe-out!"

"Go back," Hathway spoke now, glancing behind them and down the south slope, "and see how many of the boys you can bring up, Phil."

"Hell, the most of 'em, easy as that herd is to manage!" declared Harmony, wheeling his horse quickly. "We've pushed them cows a mite harder today than usual, an' they'll be ready to pile down an' chew their cuds in peace."

A glance had shown Hathway that the herd was already beginning to mill slowly, and now he stared back down on Pioneer. Not a shot had yet been fired behind the closed doors or out the windows, but the men beyond the town were creeping closer and closer, having dismounted and left their horses in the clear, the guidon's pennant in the distance rising and fluttering in their midst.

And then, after a prolonged rattle of gunfire, somebody in the line of blue lifted his hand from behind a rock and blew a shrill blast on a whistle, and the firing all along the line staggered to a halt. A couple of seconds later a white handkerchief was going up from behind the rock, the point of a saber holding it in the air.

"Now they're axin' for a truce, somehow," muttered Brady. "Must be the captain of the lot. Damned queer, ain't it?"

"Very," nodded Hathway, watching everything. "Looks like somebody's going out to meet him."

A man had appeared from a doorway, pushing a woman's big white apron in front of him on a long, slender stick. In silence Hathway and Brady watched him go forward, the man with the handkerchief waiting for quite a time before rising and slowly walking toward him. They met, the man with the handkerchief stopping beside a big rock and waiting for the other to come up—something that looked like a trick to Sam Hathway even from the distance.

It was pantomine parley down there, the man with the saber shaking his head and waving the saber threateningly. In ten minutes it was over and both men put their backs to each other and started to walking away, the one with the apron with his same, precise pace. The man with the saber was faster. After a few yards he swung quickly to his right and literally threw himself into a deep wash, his handkerchief coming down and the whistle shrilling another blast. Gunfire from the line of blue blazed again with a furious yelling went up.

Afterwards they knew that sixteen rifle balls pierced the back of the man with the apron. He must have kept to his feet for a couple of yards after the first one struck, then he came to a stiffening stop, his apron on the stick still in the air. Standing there with the spurts of dust flying from his clothing as other bullets struck, he tried to take one more pace forward, then slumped to his knees, still trying to hold that apron in the air; then he pitched forward on his face.

"Damn!" groaned Brady. "I — I never knowed a drunk Apache who was low-down enough for that."

"It was murder," nodded Hathway, "the worst I ever saw."

"Here comes Phil ahellin' up the rise!" Brady glanced behind him. "Thirteen of the boys behind 'im, the nearest I can count!"

Cowboys were storming up then, the noise of the firing a steady rain on Pioneer by this time. As always in such matters, Sam Hathway's orders were short and straight to the point. He had led men before, down in Texas when he was only twenty-four.

"But — but," only one man's eyes widened when he was told what they were going to do, "that's fightin' the Army!"

"Damn the Army when it gits like this!" leered an old Frank Darby.

"That's right!" leered another big, hook-nosed man who had never been known by any other name than Cherokee Hank. "If yuh ain't got the guts for it, Pink Hawley, then go back to them wagons an' cows an' lay down with yore litter of pups!"

"But—but I'm goin' in with yuh!" cried Pink Hawley, reaching now for his rifle. "Lead the way, Sam!"

"Then let's go!"

Suddenly streaking forward now, Hathway raced under cover of all the available timber and brush on the slope until they reached the rim of the creek. There was a little shelter at the start, then it vanished except for an occasional group of trees. But Sam Hathway was banking on the high rim of the creek, and now he had it. In a pinch they could desert their horses and hug the bank like cold cats in a chimney corner during a windy day.

By this time the men in blue had advanced to within a short two hundred yards of the edge of the town. The shooting raged, men howled in the line of blue, making more noise than blood-thirsty Apaches. The settlement women screamed here and there, children wailed everywhere, and the entire scene was one of confusion and chaos.

Some of the settlers were returning the fire now, but Pioneer's showing was poor and ineffective.

And then Hathway and his little gang were in the midst of it. Apparently no one in the line of blue had noticed them until it was too late. Holding their fire, they opened up only when they were close enough to use six-shooters, hitting the west end of the blue line and cutting it to pieces in that first wild, hell-yelling charge.

"On through and swing back on them!" yelled Hathway, watching men in blue rise and scatter, others drop and roll over as terror hit the entire line. "Kill them like rats!"

"SEVENTEEN!" Sam Hathway's eyes were wide when the last of the smoke had cleared away. "Not a man alive?"

"Why, hell, no!" Phil Harmony squirted a streak of tobacco juice at a clump of rock. "We was playin' for keeps, wasn't we?"

It had not lasted more than a minute; it had been like a flash of lightning striking the west end of the zig-zagged line of blue, then curling back. Now the blue line was gone, wiped out completely except for the dead, and it was almost a mystery how the living had managed to get away. But the creek bank had been their salvation, affording the cover of the rocks too plentiful for the plow.

"If yuh hadn't stopped us," Harmony said, "there mighta not been a single dirty skunk left."

Come take a look at the duck what had the handkerchief on a saber!" Lean old Frank Darby was hurrying up now. "If he ain't the damndest lookin' soldier cap'n I ever saw, then I'm the biggest hossthief unhung in all Texas!"

"An' that," Harmony could grin now, "has done been admitted in a hell of a lot of places down there, Frank!"

"These men are not soldiers." Hathway had already taken a look at the most of the dead. "Look at their clothing and equipment."

"That's a fact, I swear!" Dave Brady came up now. "I've tooken me a look at all of 'em. Ever' man had him an Army coat an' hat, but there ain't but six of 'em what's got the pants that goes with the coat. An' it's the same with the rifles. Only eight real Army rifles."

Settlers were venturing out of their houses and coming forward now. A tall, hawk-faced old man in homespun jeans dyed with red-oak bark and carrying a huge Bible under his arm was in the forefront. Hathway noticed at once that not a man in the lot was armed.

"I'm Joe Lane," explained the hawk-faced man, "a preacher of the Gospel. Some have called us the Shoutin' Baptists. Who are you men an' where do you come from? I—I mean," he stammered, evidently awed by the dead and the hellish looking crowd of cowboys ganging up; "how in the name of heaven did you get here?"

"We're from Texas, Parson." Hathway stepped forward and reached out his hand. "My name is Hathway, and these are my

riders. We have a trail herd just south of the hogback."

"But—but," Joe Lane looked like a man timidly shaking hands with a ghost, "I—*we* still didn't see you come until you was here, Mr. Hathway! It was as though the good Lord had sent His flyin' horsemen to deliver us from the soldiers."

"Yeah—yeah, that's a fact!" Another rangy settler was finding his voice now. "I'm Deacon Charley Miller. What Preacher Lane's just said is just what I told my Fanny, her on her knees a'cryin' an' a'prayin' while she rammed another charge into the muzzle of my extra rifle. Lord's my helper an' I'm a'hopin' I'm forgiven, but I aimed to shoot to kill, the next shot I was gonna make—an' then yuh men come like wild geese a'pilin' down from the sky!"

"But where'll it end now!" Lane patted his Bible. "Oh, Lord, where will it end now! United States soldiers lie here dead on the ground, an' that means they'll say we've defied the Army! They'll only send more, a bigger batch the next time, an' they'll wipe us out an' burn us to the ground just like they done in Peace Valley!" He jerked his head to the west. "Nobody left alive, not a cabin or a house left standin'!"

"I wouldn't let that worry me a little, Parson." Hathway looked at him with a pitying smile, realizing that he was dealing with religious fanatics here. "These men were not soldiers—not a one of them, unless a deserter or two happened to be among them."

"But they was!" shot in Deacon Miller. "They come here before!"

"An' ordered us off the land!" hastily put in the preacher. "We was told an' showed on the maps that it was government land, free for the settler to settle on. We built an' tilled, botherin' nobody, an' then only a month ago they come an' told us we was on the wrong land, that this is railroad company land, an' that we'd have to pay up an' pay big. They wanted to charge us for the improvements, for our houses, our fences an' the fields we'd cleared an' plowed, some, as you can see, already planted with rye, oats an' wheat last fall."

"So I see." Sam Hathway's eyes had already grown narrow. Powdersmoke appeared to cloud their depths as he listened to more and more of it. These Pioneer settlers were a perfect setup for any crook. Religious fanatics, they did not believe in fighting back. The thought of a drop of human blood on their hands would make them squirm.

This was an old, old game of the West being played out here. In many places people hungry for their own homes and lands had fallen into such traps. They were always allowed, even encouraged, to settle in the choice sections. By the sweat of their brows they cleared the brush for their fields. Then the sharpers came, telling them they had settled on forbidden land and ordering them to pay up or move on, leaving everything behind for the sharpers to sell at fancy prices to other, richer settlers.

"I suppose," Hathway was finally able to smile, "all these orders have come to you from Bloodtown?"

"Yes, they do—only," he added hastily, "they don't call it by that mean name any more, Mr. Hathway. They call it Shanlon now."

"*Shanlon!*" Wicked little lights came into Hathway's eyes. "Just *Shanlon*—not Skull Shanlon?"

"Well—well, yes," nodded the preacher, "it's named after Mr. Shanlon, of course. He's the railroad land agent. Only—only," he threw up his hand, "don't ever call him Skull to his face! They say he has killed men for that."

"And for something far less!" A short laugh came from Sam Hathway now, his men grinning with him. "Skull's a dangerous man!"

"Then—you know 'im?" Joe Lane took a step backward, the color leaving his lips. "You—you're maybe a friend of Mr. Shanlon's?"

"Not exactly." Hathway's face sobered instantly. "You might say that we have met in the past, and," a quick smile came back, "I'll have to admit that Mr. Shanlon came off with more than a shade of the best of it. Meanwhile what are we going to do with the dead here?"

"Bury them, of course, Mr Hathway!"

"Bury 'em?" Phil Harmony was butting into it now." Holy Hell—uh—uh, excuse me, Parson!—"

"Yes, of course!" Joe Lane would not give him time to finish. "It is the decent an' Christian thing to do. That is—that is,"

he floundered, "the way to do right. Us menfolk will wash the bodies an'—an' send word on into Mr. Shanlon. If he wants us to bring in the dead we will bring them—"

"Not me!" Deacon Miller lifted his hands in horror. "No! I ain't never settin' my foot back in Shanlon agin! They'd kill me next time!"

"We killed them," put in Hathway, "and if you feel as you seem to about it, then we'll take care of the dead. Phil," he looked at Harmony with a queer little twinkle in his eyes, "I'll leave the job up to you and the boys you want to help you. And you, Parson, don't let it worry you. I'll see Mr. Shanlon tomorrow and take all the blame for the killings—if that is even necessary after the rest of his scummy crew gets back to Bloodtown."

CHAPTER TWO

Bloodtown

PUSHING on at dawn, Sam Hathway came in sight of Bloodtown late in the afternoon. It had taken half the night to quiet Pioneer. Many of the settlers had wanted to load their meager belongings on their wagons and pull out before dawn. At first Joe Lane, the parson, had been of the same notion, and then it had been Deacon Miller, backed by his lanky, stringy-haired wife. Handling them almost one by one, Hathway had finally made them see that running was the cowardly thing and that by staying and fighting they had a chance of winning.

"Yes, like Peace Valley, maybe!" Miller's wife had once ripped in. "They stayed an' fit it out over there, an' won nothin' but a burnin' old grave for it! killed right in their own houses an' the houses burned on top of 'em, leavin' nothin' but their ashes for all this brave fightin' talk ye spout out at the mouth so much about!"

"Fanny's right!" had joined in Deacon Miller. "The Lord knows she is! We'd better go now while there's still time!"

Others had agreed with them, scared, fearing everything. Several times during the arguing it looked as if there was going to be a fight in spite of the preacher. But at dawn they had still been there. More then a score of the men had turned out to help thin the big herd into a long, narrow line to get it through the settlement and keep the cattle from pushing fences down.

And now, Sam saw that Bloodtown still had that railhead look about it, sprawling out there on a big flat for a thousand yards along the sides of the tracks. The usual boxcar depot was there, on the north side of the rails, as if to guard the coattails of passengers getting on trains when the raw north winds of winter were blowing; and some of the ragtown shacks were still in evidence, hugging the shelter of a knoll here and there.

But Bloodtown had grown in the three years since Hathway had last looked at it. Viewing it now from a tall flat two miles to southward, he could see that the depot had grown into three boxcars. Beyond it on the north side of the street a third storey had been added to the Golden Horn, it seemed to have been painted all the way around.

Oher buildings east and west of the Golden Horn had new coats of paint and shacks and dumps had been torn out or moved back. There seemed to be a dozen new warehouses south of the tracks, and the cattle pens and loading sidings stretched a mile long the railroad.

And then, as he started to ride on, something else caught Sam Hathway's eyes when he looked down on the broad flat below, making him pull up short.

"Some fixin's!" Dave Brady said. "Waterin' troughs stretchin' all over hell an' creation, huh?"

"And," nodded Hathway, "a big white signboard above each trough."

"Ride on," urged Phil Harmony, "an' let's see what them signs say. Yo'll have to read 'em, Sam. I can't read without my specs."

"An' when yuh get 'round to buyin' a pair," leered back Brady, "yo'll be too damned old to wanta learn to read!"

Then, a couple of minutes later, they were at the first white trough. Above it on a stout post set deeply in the earth was the signboard, the lettering neatly but boldly executed in black that read:

WARNING
This Is Railroad Company Property.
No Herds Will Be Allowed To Hold
Here Without A Permit.
Baldwin Shanlon.

"So that's it!" Hathway grinned as he finished reading aloud. "Mr. Shanlon seems to have quite a grip on things around here."

"But wait'll he finds we don't wanta hold here," Harmony observed. "There's still plenty of light an' time to push on to that place yo're plannin' to stop at."

The big herd was already beginning to show around the north point of the rise where Sam Hathway saw four horsemen coming toward them from beyond the depot. Each man carried a sawed-off shotgun cradled across his lap and a glittering star on his vest.

"An' now the law rides forth for a little order-givin'!" Harmony observed, "Seems like I've seen a couple of 'em sommers."

Ignoring the riders, Hathway started to lead the way on toward the flank of the herd. The men coming across the tracks spurred into a gallop. They came up swiftly and a big, blue-nosed man spoke:

"Yuh fellas got anything to do with that herd, yonder?"

"I own it!" Hathway answered him, crisply. "Who wants to know?"

"Me, Burke Twink!" snapped back the blue-nose. "I'm head Marshal of Shanlon. These are my deppities. Where are yuh goin' with them cows?"

"That's my business!"

"It's mine right now!" rasped back the Marshal. "We ain't wantin' trouble 'thout a fella just comes askin' for it, but there's rules an' regulations here when the herds come an' stop."

"Doesn't look like we're stopping."

"But yo're on railroad land!" The Marshal had already let his right hand drop to the shotgun. "Been on it for a mile. Now it looks like you're headin' for Blacksnake Draw." He jerked his head toward a railroad trestle spanning a wide draw a mile to eastward. "That draw's private property, as good as, anyhow, 'cause it was leased out last fall."

"I know," nodded Hathway, "because I leased it."

"Naw, yuh couldn't have!" The Marshal's eyes bulged. "It—it was done by a big beef-buyin' company in Kansas City!"

"I'm the company but not Kansas City." Sam Hathway was grinning now. "Better go tell Skull Shanlon that."

"We ain't tellin' Shanlon nothing'! Yo'll come with us an' tell if there's any tellin' to be told!"

"An' who'n hell," Phil Harmony was suddenly wanting to know, "is goin' to take us to see this *Shanlon* fella?"

"Just what I was wonderin', too!" put in Brady. "Either one of yuh fellas got a match on yuh?"

"Why—why, yeah," the Marshal, seeming a little dazed for the moment, lifted his hand from the shotgun and started to shove his thumb and finger into his vest pocket, "I reckon I have, but—"

"Then keep it!" ordered Brady. "Yo'll need it to light out with. We got plenty of work ahead of us."

And, with that, the three Texans rode quietly on, leaving the law of Bloodtown sitting in their saddles, the head Marshal not knowing what to do and neither of his deputies trying to tell him at the moment.

"THE GENTLEMAN from Texas must be smart." No man rattled Skull Shanlon, no man made him rant and roar. Burke Twink only made him smile when he came up the rear stairway and brought the news. Skull Shanlon always looked as if he was smiling with those thin, almost transparent lips. His head and hands were enough to scare most men, and he could blame those bloody Cheyennes up on the Big Horn for that. In his prime he had been a six-footer, broad-shouldered, bull-chested. At fifty-five he looked one hundred and forty. Fire did things to a man. He still dreamed of it, sometimes shivering inwardly when he though of it: squaws around him as he stood at the stake, every stitch of clothing stripped from him, the torture going on hour after hour.

Sometimes Skull Shanlon could look back and see the Indian side of it. He had sold the damned fools bad Indian rum. It had killed sixteen or twenty of them, a young buck on his way to be a chief in the lot. Added to that had been the rifles that had failed to shoot half the time, and cartridges that would not fit more than a third of the weapons.

And of course he could still blame Bull White and see him dying and hear him roaring in his dreams as the squaws took their turns at him. The reds had never killed a tougher human bull. The squaws had had him in hand for hours before Shan-

lon had been kicked and beaten to the stake. Hoping to impress them with his courage and endurance, Bull White had held out for hours, naked and flat on his back there on the ground, all the hair gone from many sprinklings of dry pine-needles that burned like powder. The dripping tar from the rich pine-knot held by a pretty young squaw had brought the first roar. After that it had been horrible.

White's body had still been warm when the soldiers came. Skull Shanlon could not remember much of the rest of it, except that he, himself, died, came to life and died again, over and over, a thousand times, before he saw the end of the pain in an army tent hospital.

No hair grew back, the skin never thickened, and one could hardly have been expected to sprout new ears. And he had been so handsome, with his beautiful red beard always so neatly combed.

"Yuh said to not start a real fight, Mr. Shanlon." Burke Twink was careful to clear his throat gently to break the silence before he spoke. "I handled it like that. The two triggers with 'im was about the meanest pair I ever saw. Patch Rett says he knowed one of 'em."

"Yes?" Shanlon was looking out the window behind his chair and did not turn his head.

"Says he's a Texas hossthief—or was." Twink shifted from one foot to the other, nervously rolling the brim of his hat in his hands.

"So they have gone on to Blacksnake Draw? Nice herd?"

"Plenty nice!" Twink smiled, still watching that terrible head. "That is, what I could see of it."

"And a fighting crew with it." Skull Shanlon swung around now. "It seems that they proved that last night in Pioneer. Seventeen of the boys failed to come back. The roost must look pretty bare this afternoon, but it won't be when the bunch from Cheyenne get here on the midnight. So," he waved those dark, tight-skinned hands that looked like crippled claws and yet were faster than light with a gun and slicker than bear grease when it came to cards, "I guess that's about all there is to it."

"Yuh mean," Burke Twink's pale eyes widened, "yo're just gonna let 'im set there in the draw with all them damn cows?"

"Little else to do right now, Burke." Shanlon shrugged, his shoulders and the rest of him still big despite the lack of real skin in so many places. "If, of course, it turns out that the fellow you talked to does hold that lease. It seems something that came over my head, from the general manager's office. I have stout friends in the company, at least a couple, and I've got to protect them—as well as they protect me."

"Yeah—er—so I see." Twink clawed at his collar, never having heard Skull Shanlon talk like this. "But what if he ain't the right fellow? I mean—well," he tried to shrug easily, "yuh said it was a big company in Kansas City. He ain't no big company. He was just a man on a fine black hoss, youngish fella, an'—"

"I know all about him, Burke." That smile came back again, like the long-dry skin on a mummy's face slightly wrinkling. "I make it a point to know. The only mistake I've made so far was Pioneer yesterday afternoon. That would not have been made if I could have got word to Hunter Clark in time. I sent you out on the flat just to make double-sure of my man. I generally make double-sure, sometimes triple-sure. Go the way you came in, and don't slam the door."

"Yes, sir!" Twink started backing quickly away, then stopped. "I'd like to ask if I could get a little money downstairs. Me an' my undermarshals are gettin' sort of bent in the pockets."

"Sure." Shanlon shrugged. "Tell Mack at the bar to let you have a couple of hundred on account—and split it among your pack."

"Yes, sir. Thank yuh, Mr. Shanlon." Burke Twink grinned from ear to ear now and grabbed for the handle of the door. "We all shore thank yuh. Yuh never let us down."

"Don't slam the door," repeated Shanlon, and then leaned back and seemed to go to sleep in his chair. But he was far from asleep. Many men had sworn that Skull Shanlon never slept. He was the owl of the prairies at night, the ever-alert hawk by day, seeing all, knowing all.

Money-making had become easy for him in Wyoming, far safer than gun-running and rum-smuggling to the Indians up in Montana. Peace Valley had just recently netted him a fortune. The burning of most

of the houses there had been a mistake, of course, but the valley had been cleared, the fields were in, and most of them fenced. Some of the crops had been planted. With the original settlers wiped out or forced to flee, others had been eager buyers.

But just now he had cattle on his mind—nice, fat Texas steers, driven, evidently, by a master on the trail. Keen eyes that usually saw as well at night as day had first reported the herd six days ago. Old Dutch Riley, former buffalo hunter, had spent a night in camp with the cowboys, posing as an Army Indian scout. Dutch had had a tale to spill only yesterday morning.

"Three year' 'go, 'twas," Riley had told him. "He was here, yeah. Hathway's the name, 'f yuh remember."

"Hathway?" Shanlon had rolled the name on his tongue, and then his eyes had brightened. "Yes, I know. Easiest money I ever took from a plain damned fool! Go down and tell Mack to give you—well, say twenty or twenty five on account."

And now he knew everything—who he was up against, how he would have to handle him. Hathway would be smarter, of course, but men could become only so smart. In a few minutes of play—if he could only get him into another game—Skull Shanlon would know just how much wiser he had grown in three years. Most Texans were easy marks because most of the fools were honest.

At eight o'clock in the evening he was ready to go downstairs and take his old table in the northwest corner of the great room below. Less than thirty minutes later he was again looking this Sam Hathway fellow in the eyes and seeing that the Texan still had his ready smile.

CHAPTER THREE

The Warning

"GOOD evening, Mr. Shanlon."

"Why, good evening, Hathway!" Skull Shanlon thrust out his right claw, gripping the strong hand across the green-topped table. "You can see that I never forget a face!"

"Some are easily remembered." There might have been a mean little dig in that, but Shanlon could see no trace of it in the smiling face above him. Garbed in black except for a spotless white shirt, Hathway had removed all signs of the long and weary trail from him. He had at least the poise of a gentleman, and Shanlon remembered that he had had this same poise before, even when leaving this same table.

"Nice weather!"

"Wonderful weather. May I sit?"

"By all means!" Shanlon waved him to a chair across from him. "The game, if you're looking for one, can be opened at any time."

"Thanks."

It was a hell of a way to get started, two bulldogs wagging their tails and lolling their tongues. In the end—tonight, tomorrow, the next day or the next—they were going to have trouble. That was a certainty, but until the time came for it Shanlon could be nice—damned nice—when playing for big stakes.

He had seen Hathway come in. A couple of Texans had come a few minutes ahead of him, a pair of hard old hellions, one about sixty feet in advance of the other. They had bellied up to the long, black bar with its row of crystal-spangled lights overhead; then Hathway entered, followed by a couple of more hard customers, well apart, making a neat little spread-out in case of sudden trouble. Probably there would be more of these Texans out front leaning against the wall, no two of them close together.

It was all to be expected. Shanlon's men were in their places. No one found him napping. Some of the best quick-trigger men in the West were in his string. He never came downstairs in the Golden Horn until they were in place. All of them were quiet, level-voiced, men who knew the meaning of every signal. Doc Halper, up there at the corner bend at the bar, was one of the quickest and deadliest shots a man could find. He looked like a doctor, a rather gay but utterly harmless old dog in his fancy vest and hard hat tilted on the back of his thin yellow hair.

At a table, the Utah Kid was already holding hands with a pretty little redhead and looking moon-eyed in love. Whiskey Smith was the only tough-looking one, garbed as a buffalo hunter from a great knife on his belly to his poison tube. He, too, was in place not far away, talking to three young men who might have just

jumped off the Westbound from Saint Louis or Chicago. As he talked, Smith pretended to draw designs on the table-cloth with a grimy thumb as if making a map and explaining some section of this yet wild and nearlawless country. No man just in with a trail herd could know that those three "tenderfeet" with Smith were as deadly as coiled rattlers.

could lift an eyebrow or get his breath.

"Have a drink? On the house?"

"No, thanks, Shanlon." Hathway's smile became something akin to a little smirk. "I didn't come to drink tonight. Maybe not to gamble. I had an idea we might talk about Pioneer."

"Pioneer?" The thin skin on Shanlon's face twisted into something that might have been called a puzzled frown, then it relaxed and he had his same queer smile back again. "Oh, yes! Little settlement several miles south of us. What about it?"

"They're just poor, downtrodden people trying to get along, Shanlon. Why not let them alone?"

"I see." The round buttons of eyes in the ungodly face became narrow. "You seem to be trying to stir up something, Hathway. Still sore, I suppose, because of the money you lost here before—"

"Only I never get sore, Shanlon. "Doesn't pay. Besides, the money didn't bother me too much. The men who were murdered—"

"We had that out before, Hathway!" Shanlon lifted his hand. "I had no part in it, was right here behind my table, and you know damned well I was here. You were sitting in that same chair. If it's trouble you have come to Shanlon to find—"

"Bloodtown, you mean!"

"Well, Bloodtown, damn it, if you like it better!" Shanlon's eyes were like glittering little blades of light. "But as I wanted to say, if it's trouble you've come for—well," he opened his claws of hands, "we have it on the bargain counter here every day. You can get it on credit, payment due in hell, if you're short of cash."

"Thanks." Hathaway chuckled softly. "Now we know each other and won't be surprised at anything that happens. Listen, Shanlon, I'm in Wyoming this time to beat you to death, shoot your belly full of holes or run you out of town."

"So!" Shanlon's eyes again became round buttons, not with any pinch of fear but with absolute surprise. No man had ever talked to him like this, no man had ever been fool enough, most certainly not in the Golden Horn. When he was able to find his voice after that first word it was low and gentle, and he was smiling again: "I've heard of damned fools taking to suicide as a way out, but this is the first time I've ever sat across the table from one, Mr. Hathway."

"Then we understand each other." Again Sam Hathway's hand came across the table. Taken by surprise for only an instant, Shanlon shoved forward a tight-skinned claw to meet it. "I believe I'll take that drink now. Let's make it champagne, and we'll cut a deck to see whether it's on the house or on me. Maybe I can cut better this time. You were as lucky as all hell the last time."

"And that means," Shanlon was still holding the strong hand, "you think that it was luck, pure luck and nothing else?"

"On the contrary," Hathway's voice was still low, the big smile still there, "I still think you're the dirtiest damned crook in all Wyoming, and I'm here to trim you down. Do we still have that drink?"

"Sure—we will." It must have taken five seconds for Skull Shanlon to get that out, then he lifted his left hand, voice rising with it to a big bald-headed and balloon-bellied man in a white coat behind the bar. "Porky! The best bottle of champagne in the house and glasses for two. And," he added with a queer pitch in his tone that made everybody turn to look at him, "a deck of cards!"

Everybody watched them. There had been tension in the big room the moment Sam Hathway had walked into the doorway. Many of the women had forgotten the men at their tables and had focused their attention on the newcomer. Only Skull Shanlon's gunmen had known that there was hell in the wind—or apt to be. Now those gunmen had just been given a signal to lay off and not start anything.

Two lanky Missourians at the bar were the first to wipe their lips and leave. Others followed them, one or two at a time.

And yet there was no outward sign of trouble back there at Shanlon's big gambling table. The Texan won the first bottle of champagne. He had to pay for the sec-

ond one, and then Shanlon was calling for a new deck and ten thousand dollars in gold.

It was fast work after that. The Texan produced heavy money belts. The gold clattered and jingled on the big table, and yet there was no curious crowd ganging around. Shanlon's men kept to their places. The Texans still drooled beer from their bottles at the bar, though they had turned and were silently watching.

When the woman started to disappear everybody knew that the breaking point was getting close to hand. Shanlon had called for money again and again, and yet he laughed and the Texan laughed with him. It was cut, shuffle for the cut, and cut again back there at the big table, the lights making a devil's death-mask of Skull Shanlon's face and hairless head. Then they saw Shanlon sit back, they heard him speak, his voice as nice as a morning breeze in hot August:

"Eighty thousand, cold, young fellow."

"Some interest," laughed the Texan, "for the last time."

"And you've learned a lot," Shanlon tried to laugh, "since the last time we met, Mr. Hathway."

"Even pups must grow up, Mr. Shanlon." It seemed that the Texan had been scooping money into sacks for an hour and standing the bags on nearby chairs. At the moment he had his back to Shanlon, and suddenly everybody saw him duck and wheel, a long black Colt filling his hand from somewhere, the muzzle covering Shanlon before a gunman in the room could lift an eyebrow or get his breath.

"Damned foolish of you, Mr. Shanlon." The Texan's tone was still soft. "I thought you were smarter than that. The next time you want to pull a gun when a man's back is turned—well, Mr. Shanlon, you'd better have your chair fixed. It squeaks."

"You win, Mr. Hathway!" And then Shanlon laughed. It was the first real, outright laugh any man had ever heard come from him in Bloodtown. Some of the old, red-bearded, red-haired, swashbuckling Baldwin Shanlon was there, the man who could win or lose and laugh.

"And more than that, Mr. Hathway," he lifted his hand, and this time in the shadows it really looked like a hand, "this gold is heavy. When you've tied the drawstrings of that last sack I'll have some of the boys carry it outside for you and load it on your horses." He glanced at the other Texans along the bar. "Come back and see me tomorrow night, and maybe then you won't break the bank."

"Thanks!" Holstering his Colt, the Texan turned back to the last stout sack. "I think I'm going to like Bloodtown, Mr. Shanlon."

"And I truly, truly hope you do, Mr. Hathway!" Skull Shanlon could not stop laughing. "Something tells we you're going to abide with us among our rolling prairies and knolls for a long, *long* time."

"HOW IN the *he-e-ell* did he git away with it?" groaned Pink Hawley, the complainer, when they rode away with their horses laden with gold. "It—it just couldn't be done!"

"An' wasn't, Pink," grinned Phil Harmony. "Yo're either drunk agin or just lyin' down dreamin'. Next thing yuh know yo'll be tryin' to tell us yo're in Wyomin'."

"Damn it, I am in Wyomin'—or ain't I?" Hawley turned nervously in his saddle and looked back at the fading lights of Bloodtown as they racked on in the darkness toward Blacksnake Draw. "At times I have to pinch myself to make shore."

"He won it, an' he took it," growled Dave Brady. "I reckon that's about all yuh can say. There was gun-lawyers all over, but they didn't know many of us might be hangin' 'round in the dark outside waitin' for the first fella to start to make a play. Danged if it don't look like a little rain's gonna blow up 'fore mornin', don't it?"

"Rain 'fore mornin', yeah. Just felt a big drop hit."

Hathway went almost straight to his big wagon when they reached camp. It was a fortune he had won by the turn of high cards, but he did not look on the bags of gold for the sake of money alone. This night's work had repaid something to Skull Shanlon for three years ago, and it had been swept out of his hands so neatly and crookedly he would probably spend the next week or two wondering how it was done—if Skull Shanlon lived that long.

Sam Hathway had dismissed all thoughts of him for the night within ten minutes after he had crawled into his bunk in the wagon.

The rain had steadied, drumming a tune on the canvas overhead.

Sam Hathway was out of his bunk at dawn, never even dreaming that that heavy fall of rain was due to have a great many things to do with his life in the future. The sun was soon coming, breaking through the parting clouds and blazing down on the wet prairies and knolls. Mud was ankle-deep everywhere. At ten o'clock he saddled and rode back to Bloodtown. Phil Harmony and Dave Brady followed him.

He had sent a telegram to Kansas City last night, just before crossing the wheel-rutted street to enter the Golden Horn. The fat operator had been none too friendly then, but he was downright sullen now as he handed the answer to the wire over the little counter, then quickly turned back to his instrument board with a grunt:

"Just come in."

"Your own check says it came at eight twenty!" Hathway could not help reminding him of that after the first glance at the telegram. "It's nearly ten thirty now. What did Skull Shanlon think of it?"

"Shanlon?" The operator wheeled as if kicked from behind, eyes popping with surprise, then anger filling his fat and bumpy face. "Mr. Shanlon didn't see it! Nobody but the one it goes to sees a telegram! What are you trying to do, start something, fellow?"

"Not this morning." Hathway shrugged as he turned and headed for the door and the cindered walk outside. "Just thought I'd remind you. By the way," he wheeled back suddenly, "I think I'll send a wire and accept this offer. The price of beef seems to have gone up."

"It's your funeral." The operator leered, standing there waiting as Hathway wrote his reply. "Better read that thing you got a second time, Hathway. Shipping cars are hard to get. There's a big outfit camped twelve or fourteen miles west of us. They've been there going on three weeks now. It may be another month or six weeks—"

"Before they get cars, yes!" cut in Hathway, suddenly looking up and straight into the man's eyes. "I know about Bloodtown. But I'll get cars. The mere fact that last night's telegram got through tells me that. Better let Skull Shanlon know that. Send this!"

"It's your funeral." The operator grinned as he scooped up the money and the message. "Not mine, Hathway."

Turning as the operator turned, Hathway again started for the door, then stopped in his tracks. A girl in blue was just entering the room. She was tall and beautiful enough to be shocking. She was red-haired and about twenty. She stopped as he stopped, each looking one another up and down, his hand going quickly to his hat. The girl spoke first, smiling as she spoke.

"I am wondering," she asked, "if you would give me the lift of a stirrup across the street, Mr. Hathway? The mud is knee-deep between the depot and the Golden Horn."

"Why—why, of course!" he stammered, the big black hat coming off entirely now. "I'd be pleased to oblige, ma'am."

There was something to this, a motive ill-hidden and he knew it but could not fathom it in the spur of a moment. The girl had turned at once, and he was following her, knowing that the operator had wheeled and was staring at them.

"I hate to be a bother," she told him when they came to his horse, "but I rode across the tracks in a buckboard to see a horse, and now I'm faced with wading or asking a favor."

"It won't be a favor, ma'am," he smiled, swinging into his saddle. It's a pleasure!"

He reached down his hand then and grasped her hand. Lifting her long skirts she put a dainty left foot in the stirrup, and he swung her up beside him, quickly putting an arm around her as people stared at them.

"Stay out of town at night." She was talking to him now, her voice low and fast. "Baldwin Shanlon will kill you or have you killed before another sunrise if you don't. He is already playing his cards to get even for last night's work."

"And who, ma'am," he scowled, slowing his horse as they struck a deeper puddle, "are you to tell me?"

"I'm Shanlon's niece—and not at all proud of it!" The answer was flat and seemed final on that score. "I heard him talking last night after he had come back upstairs. He is going to kill you. Make no mistake about it."

And why," he scowled again, "would his own niece tell me about it?"

"Because I hate and fear him to the marrow of my bones!" He felt her body tighten in his arms. "He is no longer a man. The fire did something to his brain. He is a devil, a monster. Watch yourself, and watch your herd. Last night I heard him saying that the storm gave him an idea. It has something to do with Blacksnake Draw.

"Thank you so much!" Now she was changing the subject, for they were coming to the planked sidewalk, a group of rough-looking characters standing there staring. A few rods away Harmony and Brady were watching, one leaning against a corner, the other half-sitting on a hitch-rack. "It was far better than wading!"

There was no time for more. They were at the edge of the walk. He swung alongside of it, and she dropped quickly down. Before he could get his breath she was gone, hurrying away through the crowd that parted for her, and up a stairway on the side of the Golden Horn.

"QUEER, mighty queer she'd go to all the bother to tell yuh that." Dave Brady was inclined to keep talking about it as they rode back to the draw with Harmony silent and thoughtful. "Somethin' yuh would already know. Anybody'd know Skull Shanlon couldn't take the lickin' yuh handed out last night without tryin' to make yuh pay for it."

"There was Pioneer, too," finally nodded Harmony. "That ain't to be forgot, not by a damn sight! Then here's the draw swept clean an' clear outa his hands. That, I think, was about the smartest thing of it all. It sorter splits Skull away from his big drag with the railroad company—or somebody in it who was backin' 'im."

"But the draw might hold something for him after all." Hathway was deeply thoughtful. "She said the storm gave him some idea last night. I'm just wondering what it could be. Once inside the draw and a herd is as good as in a great corral. There isn't a steer in the lot that could climb either of those steep walls."

"May be the gal was just tellin' a damn lie?" ventured Harmony.

"She wasn't!" It was a surprise to them, Hathway included, to hear him defend her so quickly. "I—I'd somehow bet on her!"

"Only one thing's shore." Harmony took himself a chew from a twist of black tobacco. "She was good lookin'. Maybe just too damn purty, an' that's about all I'd bet on, Sam."

He tried to dismiss it for the rest of the day. But the girl would not leave him. He kept seeing her in his mind, and when night came he found that he could not sleep even with the rain coming back around midnight to drum and dance on the canvas roof of the wagon. An hour before dawn he heard a horse coming, splashing through the mud and water in a wild gallop, and a minute later he heard the girl calling his name:

"Mr. Hathway! *Mr. Hathway!* This is Ruth Kincaide from the Golden Horn! *Mr. Hathway!*"

"He's in that wagon there, ma'am!" Some one was answering her as Hathway flung himself out of his bunk and into his clothes to strike a light. "Yes, *that* wagon!"

"What is it?" Hathway was throwing open the flaps at the end of the wagon then, the light falling out on her in the saddle of a dripping bay. "Good God, your face!"

"Don't talk!" The two words were like wild sobs coming from her, welts and bruises standing out on her face in the light. "He beat me and locked me in my room with—with Aunt Margaret! Get your men on the rims! They're already there. They left before I tied sheets and blankets together to escape from the window!"

"But what is it?" he half-yelled. The entire camp was now awake and men were hastily getting into riding clothes.

"I don't know!" she cried. "It's something terrible! Something about filling old whiskey barrels and oil barrels with dynamite and rolling them down the slopes of the draw! Don't leave your wagons unguarded. They—they'll rob them when the cattle stampedes and—"

A thundering explosion from northward cut her off, a man's yell lifting in the distance in sudden terror. Then another explosion came, one, two, three, four, five, six! One behind the other as if all hell's guns were opening up to shake the earth!

Hathway wheeled and put out the light as something crashed through a bow overhead, bits of wet canvas and wood flying. The camp was within rifle-range of the

rims to the east and west here, and men on the rims were opening up, shooting at the wagons as more of those tremendous explosions rocked the draw as though an earthquake had it in its teeth.

Startled cattle were bawling in the distance now. As Hathway jumped from the wagon he saw milling brutes in the bursting light of another explosion and knew that a real calamity was upon him. The cattle would have to come this way, straight through the camp and under the railroad trestle, then up the slopes to scatter in all directions.

"Some have been hit!" yelled Harmony, in a crowd now bringing up the horses that were always kept close at hand in case of trouble at night. "They're a'smellin' the blood!"

And then, with bullets driving into the wagons, many of them fired from heavy old buffalo rifles along the rims, the herd was coming, a great-splashing cloud of damnation beginning to head down the draw. The bawling and knocking of horns made a deafening din to strike terror into the heart of any cowboy, especially in such a rain-whipped night.

There was no time for saddling horses, no time for anything. Hathway tried to get to his horse. A spinning barrel off the west slope exploded less than fifty yards above the camp. In its roaring light he saw that a string of cattle leading the herd was almost upon them and would be crashing straight through the camp in a matter of seconds. Then he heard the girl screaming at him:

"Take my hand! Come up behind me!"

He wheeled, grabbed her hand then, and he was up and they were away, the girl's dripping bay snorting, camp-gear smashing as cattle struck only a few yards behind them, hoofs and bodies due to tear hell out of everything they came upon.

CHAPTER FOUR

Guns Against a Madman

"LET no man be alive when it's over!" Skull Shanlon gave the order from the saddle of a big iron-gray in a little clump of pines—a humped figure in his shining black raincape, his great-brimmed hat pulled low on that hairless head.

"But—but," Burke Twink answered him, "yore niece is down there with 'em somewhere!"

"Damn my niece!" Shanlon ground his fist on his broad saddlehorn. "Until three months ago I never saw her face. It was a curse when I saw it, putting her wild damned notions in my poor Margaret's head!"

Very few people in Bloodtown knew that he was actually married. His tall and gaunt Margaret was rarely seen. She had never been downstairs in the great drinking, dancing and gambling room. Sometimes, it was whispered, Skull Shanlon took her for a short ride in the moonlight. He held to her like a leech, owing his life to her, for she had come to him in that Army tent when he was dying, bending over him night and day and doing things the doctors could have never done. Even to this day she had never mentioned the fact that he had deserted her up in Montana on the Missouri for another woman.

The coming of Ruth Kincaide had spoiled a lot of things. At once the girl had seen through him. She had always been moving about upstairs and seeing things below. In her three months in Bloodtown she had probably seen a dozen murders done, and there had been some hellish rows. And only yesterday morning at the breakfast table she had laughed at him, boldly and outright.

"Yes, I saw this Mr. Hathway from the railing of the balcony," she had told him. "I saw him give you the cleaning of your life—and I hope he goes right on to kill you!"

And yesterday afternoon he had given her a beating with a quirt, one, he had thought, that would forever put her in her place. Margaret had fainted when the girl fainted, and then Margaret had come out of it and had struck at him with a chair, getting herself knocked half under the bed, a blow with the butt of the quirt that might have broken her neck. Locking them both in then and placing a guard at the door, he had thought that he had taken the situation in hand. Then, after midnight, Burke Twink had come to report that she had escaped, stolen one of his horses out of the big barn behind the Golden Horn, and ridden like a fool toward Blacksnake Draw. What in hell did she see in this damned

Sam Hathway to go so all-fired crazy? He had asked Twink that question.

"She aims to help 'im cut yuh down," the Marshal had told him. "I ain't never seen such hate in a woman's eyes as I saw in her eyes ever'time I'd catch her lookin' at yuh."

Now he would finish the girl as well as Sam Hathway and his infernal Texas crowd. There would be talk about it, of course, but there had been talk about the wipe-out in Peace Valley, a world of mumbling and grumbling, yet it had been done and was about forgotten—just as this would soon die down and blow over.

Two big wagons with hayracks on them had carried the empty barrels to their places along the rims at midnight. Another wagon had brought the dynamite, a box filled with sticks capped and fuzed by old Jim Light, a former California gold miner who had worked at his job from noon until long after nightfall, carefully soaping his fuzed sticks so that the rain would not dampen the caps.

The rest of it was easy. Men hiding on the rims in the darkness and waiting for the signal had dropped six unfuzed sticks into each of the barrels. At the signal a fuzed stick had been lighted, then quickly dropped into a barrel, and the barrel given a roll to start it on its way, the explosion of the fuzed stick bound to set off the others.

"And now the light barrels!" ordered Shanlon, as explosion after explosion rocked the draw, the racing riders and pouring cattle were getting close to the trestle. "They'll hit just in time!"

This would be the crowning achievement. Barrels with their heads knocked out had been packed full of straw and cans of oil spilled in. Placed at either end of the bridge, they were ready now, and Twink lifted a railroad lantern from the side of his saddle, hastily turning up the wick. It was the second time he had used it, lifting it and whirling it in a circle above his horse's head.

"And there they go!" nodded Shanlon a few moments later, watching light flare at the other end of the trestle and start spilling down the slope of the draw.

"I'm goin' in for some of the shootin'!" Twink lowered the lantern and the wick. "I could never stay outa a good fight!"

"Stay with me!" Shanlon shot out a quick claw and caught him by the arm. "There's more than enough in place to take care of it! And—and," he added rather lamely, "I'd like to have somebody with me to enjoy the fun. There's that damned Ruth Kincaide! On one of the best horses with him!"

"I can't tell whose hoss it is," Twink was pulling up a long rifle from the side of his saddle, "but here's a gun if yuh wanta shoot it."

"Give it to me!" Shanlon grabbed the weapon, started to swing it to his shoulder, and then lowered it. Sam Hathway and the girl down there were still a couple of hundred yards from the bridge. Flaming barrels rolled down from further northward along the east rim were showing them plainly in the light, and Skull Shanlon had suddenly seen something.

"Damn it," he snarled, "in another second or two I believe I'm going to have to admit making one of the greatest mistakes in my life!"

Arms around the girl now, both hands on the reins, Sam Hathway was curving away from the bridge, a flying horseman swinging toward the foot of the draw. Other riders were following him.

"Look! *Look!*" Skull Shanlon's voice had become a croak. "Damn it, Burke, we fired the light barrels too soon! It turned them back—and now the damned herd's turning with them, the leaders afraid of all the fire down there!"

"Damned if it don't look like it!" nodded the Marshal, reaching for his rifle.

SKULL SHANLON had made a number of mistakes. Now he sat in his big saddle and watch his plans go to hell below. Hathway and the girl, trailed by only two men, seemed to be the only ones ahead of the herd, and Hathway had been working his way toward the east side of the draw all the time. Others behind had scooted at once for the slopes, striking them at an angle and going up as far as their horses could make it, several of them having to jump for it then and go scrambling on up on their hands and knees, letting their horses go. Now gunfire was beginning to break on the rims, and men were falling back.

One mistake here had been in his timing. He could see now that he should have

struck two hours earlier. Then there was the dynamite. The heavy weather carried the sounds of the explosions everywhere. One glance showed him that Bloodtown was awake, like the settler camp north of town where lights were springing into life.

And he should have known better when it came to those blazing fire barrels down there, none of which had come close enough to the timbers of the trestle to start them burning. He had been too quick about them; he would not admit that he had been a fool—just too quick! And yet he knew that fire would turn cattle when nothing else in the world would move them in a stampede.

But the biggest mistake, after all, was his own temper. For the first time in years he had let an intended victim goad him into moving too quickly to formulate a foolproof plan. And Sam Hathway had done just that. Robbing him—as good as robbing him, damn him!—of eighty thousand dollars right in front of the crowd had been a part of it. Throwing a gun in his face right there in the Golden Horn—and telling him to get his chair fixed!

"We'd better get back to town!"

"Huh!" Twink's voice made him jump.

"Yeah," nodded the Marshal, staring toward the town. "Ever' house is lit up like a church for a weddin'. 'Fore long people are gonna be comin' to see what's wrong out here. Dynamite musta jarred 'em outa their beds. Maybe they'll think the Cheyennes are comin'!"

"*Cheyennes!*" Shanlon cringed at the word, then caught himself, letting go an oath under his breath. "Yes, maybe so! Looks like our cowards on the rims are leaving!"

Gunfire was still crashing along the rims behind them as they galloped rapidly away, but it was dying out. The main force had been placed on the slopes south of the trestle, there to take advantage of the light from the flaming barrels and make it a clean sweep when the riders came through.

Getting the lead, Shanlon kept it, swinging more and more to the right to avoid an old wagon trail following the upper side of the tracks. When they were half-way back to town they pulled up in a pine thicket between two big knolls and watching a cloud of horsemen pouring out of town and heading for the draw.

They were as nervous as wolves leaving a kill after that, but they finally arrived at the big barn. Shanlon was out of his saddle at once, turning his horse over to the Marshal. Seconds later he was going up the back way, a jumpy shadow stopping here and there to peer into the darkness. Once inside his own room he carefully closed and locked the door behind him, and then changed to dry clothing.

In twenty minutes he was Shanlon again, neat and dry. But within a few minutes after he had stepped out into the hall and headed for Margaret's room he was something else.

The guard he had left was still there at the door—bucktoothed little Tobey Kline.

"She was acryin' agin," he whispered. "Like her heart was agonna break. She twice axed for water, but I wouldn't open the door, just like yuh said for me to not open it."

"Damned good thing you didn't open it!" Shanlon fitted a key in the lock, gave it a twist, and shoved open the door. It was dark inside and he spoke one word as he struck a match: "Margaret?"

He moved toward her, not going to soften, and yet she was so beautiful lying there across the bed, her head on her left arm, right hand covering her face. He stepped to her and gave her a slap on the hip, his voice sharp:

"*Margaret!*" He slapped again, then grabbed her, shaking her violently before he jerked his hands away and staggered back. In a voice that was a broken croak he said, "She—she's dead!"

"Maybe yuh hit 'er too hard, Mr. Shanlon." That was Tobey Kline in the doorway. "Do yuh reckon?"

"Hit her?" Shanlon wheeled on him, murder in his eyes, the skinned-devil face terrible. "Who hit her, you rat? Who?"

"I—I mean," Kline stepped back, his hands coming up, "she—she fell too hard on—on the stairsteps!"

"Yes, on the steps, *the steps!*" Shanlon wheeled back, staring. On the steps. She had been up—*Margaret!*"

He was on the floor on his knees beside the bed then, pawing at her, shaking her again, whispering to her, a man lost to his surroundings and gone crazy for the moment. The amazed Kline stared and shifted from one foot to the other. How

long he was there did not matter. What he was saying did not matter. When he came up it was with a jerk, his hand flying to his waistband.

"It's me, Mr. Shanlon, it's me!" cried Burke Twink, his hands lifted and his face white. "I—I only tetched yuh on the shoulder!"

"What in hell do you want!" Shanlon was like a snarling madman now, his eyes glittering, his cheeks wet. "Damn you, Burke Twink, I'll blow your heart out if—"

"But—but I only come to tell yuh," wailed the Marshal, "that—that bunch from the draw is headin' for town, Mr. Shanlon! Sam Hathway an' his crowd!"

"God bless him for that!" cried Shanlon, lurching toward the door. "Stay here, Tobey! Close the door and stay just as you were! Keep your mouth shut! You haven't seen anything, you haven't heard anything. She did it on the stairs, and that's all." He laughed then, wild and startling. *"On the stairs!"*

HATHWAY was coming to him, and that meant that Hathway was playing the part of a fool at last. Only a fool came for a man in his own stronghold, and the Golden Horn was that, all the way to the roof.

He had twenty men here, most of them having scurried back to the Golden Horn for their drinks. Others were outside, waiting his call. In a few minutes ten more men had joined the crowd, all nervous and shifty-eyed.

"Ten men will hit the roof with Doc Halper!" he ordered. "Ten more will go to the barn with Whiskey Smith! The rest will stay here—and we can whip hell staring us in the face!"

"An' may have to whip hell, Shanlon." Whiskey Smith, the former buffalo hunter, answered him. "It looks like it's comin' this way, though I guess it's yuh, mostly, that this fella Hathway wants. I was the last to leave the rim. When a crowd of them settlers rode into the draw he was havin' yore niece strip her back an' arms an' show 'em somethin'. Wonder what it coulda been?"

"Damn that!" snapped Shanlon. "Take your crowd and get to hell on to the barn. And remember, all of you!" His voice shot higher. "Win this fight this morning, and I'll lay a hundred dollars in gold in each man's hand just as a little extra cash!"

He watched them go out ahead of him, ten men who always fought with him when there were big jobs on hand. Clutching his quart he followed them.

Doc Halper was quieter. He took time to walk behind the bar and set out an opened bottle for his crowd, then they were picking up their rifles and heading for the stairs—quiet but deadly men who would play hell once they were up there on the roof.

"And the rest will stay here." Shanlon looked around the room, the crowd looking thin now. "We'll handle the windows and doors—and the floors above us. Set out a couple of those opened bottles for them, Burke. Some of you fellows look a little pale."

* * * *

The first of the gunfire rocked the town, starting with a few shots from the roof of the Golden Horn and spreading like lightning to the barn. Now a cloud of horsemen on the old trail north of the tracks scattered four horses going down, a man rocking back in his saddle and rolling off to the muddy ground. Shanlon saw it all from a second-floor window and flew into a rage.

"The damned fools!" he croaked. "That gang didn't intend to take part in the fight! It's only a bunch that rode out to the draw just to see what was going on!"

But it was started now. The men scattered from the trail were seeking shelter at once, and some were now snatching rifles from the sides of their saddles. In a matter of moments they were opening fire at the Golden Horn, and then Shanlon heard guns bark from a knoll behind the barn.

"It's Hathway's gang!" he yelped, more exicted now than he had been in years. "He's sweeping the barn and the roof first!"

He had been trying to get a glimpse of Hathway and his gang, but they had scattered out, coming into it like Indians, every man for himself until he got to an appointed place. Now they were on that damned knoll, hidden in the rocks and trees, and some of them were up high enough to rake the roof of the Golden Horn itself.

Doc Halper was soon proof enough for that. He came staggering down the stairs, left hand shoved into his bosom, the blood

dripping from his elbow. Only five men were behind him, and two of those were rocking on their feet, their faces like death.

"That was a damned fine idea, Shanlon!" Halper's voice was thick. "Five of the boys like it so well up there they decided to stay an' look up at the rain comin' down on 'em. They're dead!"

"Dead!" Shanlon glared at him. "Well, damn it, somebody was certain to get killed, and you might have known it. They should have kept down and out of sight—"

"Go up an' try it yoreself!" cut in Halper. "I'm goin' out the front door of this dump with my handkerchief in my hand. The boys here," he jerked his head at his remaining men, "seem to have the same little notion in their heads."

"You're a damned coward, Doc!"

"Am I?" Halper's grin was a mean leer. "Maybe I am, but I'm not exactly all damned fool. Them settlers yo've been gougin' for money for water an' grass are in this thing. Then there's yore niece. Yuh whipped her with a quirt, cutting the blood outa her all over."

It was desertion, so cold and ruthless it jarred him to the bone. Cursing them, he watched them go, knowing that he alone could not stop them. In a minute after they were gone he wheeled and raced down the stairs, and was just in time to see the last of his men going out the front doorway. Then he realized that the firing in the barn had stopped. He wheeled toward the stairs again, then fell back, hugging the railing. An oath broke from him a moment later when he saw that it was only Tobey Kline coming down, having deserted his post at last. Kline jarred every bone in him when he spoke.

"That fella Hathway, now, the one what won all the money from yuh, Mr. Shanlon. He's upstairs awaitin' for yuh."

"Upstairs!" The word was a yell. "How—how in the hell did he get upstairs, you damned moron!"

"In a window." Kline was innocent enough about it. "Seems how he sorter placed a ladder from the ground to the roof an' just come on up. I told 'im yore wife got hurt fallin' down the stairs. He didn't offer to hurt me. Just took my gun."

"Damn!" Shanlon licked his fleshless lips, glaring right and left, a man now looking for someplace to run. "This is hell!"

"Couldn't be worse, Shanlon." A voice answered him from the little hall leading to the narrow rear stairway.

"Hathway?"

"That's what they call me, Shanlon." A low, jarring little splatter of laughter came with the words. "You'd better have your guns in your hands. I'm coming out of here as soon as you'll let that half-wit go on and get out of the way. You tried to build yourself a kingdom here on the blood of men, women and children, but it's falling this morning—and that means you're dying. Let that half-wit go on!"

"Damn the half-wit!" It was then that Shanlon made his grab, throwing his left arm around Kline and snatching him to him. In a rush, six-shooter up, Kline in front of him as a shield, he charged the mouth of the little hallway. "Shoot if you can!"

They heard the gunfire outside, for it had grown still in the wet street and behind the Golden Horn. They heard Skull Shanlon yell as he went down, one pounding foot and then the other shot from under him as Sam Hathway dropped to the floor and opened his fire, a rolling drum of it instantly recognized by the Texans and bringing a cheer from them.

"Sam's got 'im over his barrels!" bellowed Phil Harmony. And then they saw Tobey Kline, the half-wit, flying out the door and into the arms of the waiting mob in front.

"He shot his feet from under 'im!" yelled Kline. "Then—then he seemed to tear both his hands off. Mr. Shanlon's in there, acryin' an' atwistin' on the floor an' ain't able to pick up a gun!"

"Yes, he's in there!" Hathway appeared then, yells and curses raging behind him. "He's what you might call sawed down to size. All you have to do is to go in and get him."

And then, with the settlers and town people cheering him, he headed on along the street until he came to his horse in a narrow alleyway. He was going now to find Ruth Kincaide again, but there was no need of him going anywhere. He heard his Texans yelling again, and he saw her coming to him from eastward, galloping through another splattering fall of rain.

THE END

HELL ON THE HORN

With a sudden, upthrust stab, Lak caught the coyote squarely and tossed him into the air.

By HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

LAK whistled shrilly as he lowered his head, and, with the speed of forked lightning, slashed upward. The timing of this majestic, battle-scarred little antelope buck was perfect. A raiding dog coyote was caught just up in front of the brisket to go spinning into space. He dropped, badly gored, in a clump of sagebrush, there to lick his grievous wound.

At Lak's back a frenzied herd of several hundred sheep stood in circular defensive formation, adult heads out to guard the young within the circle. With the young lambs stood the young of Lak's band, some fawns, yearlings and one or two does.

Lak was the wise one. At the first threat from Ka-hee the coyote leader and his raiding kindred, the chieftain buck had flashed a signal from his semaphoring rump patches. The antelope band had bounded off in-

The coyote packs reeled back, and the man-creatures looked on in stunned silence, when the mighty Lak, wielding his pronged antlers like a rapier, joined Ramby, great prize Merino ram with the battering horns, in their grim, deadly battle against the snarling hordes of wilderness raiders.

stantly, to find a haven here at the sheep band. It was instinctive with the antelope and dated back to the days when Lak's ancestors sought refuge from wolves in amongst the herds of massive buffalo.

A handsome young buck now ranged himself alongside Lak to strike savagely at an attacking coyote with deadly sharp forehoofs. Later in the season, Lak might be called upon to defend his kingship against this fighting pronghorn, but just now when death threatened, Lak flanked the young buck and together they hooked and struck in united defensive action.

A venturesome coyote was slinking between the engaged antelope bucks when suddenly a heavy ram detached himself from the sheep band. Blatting throatily he reared and rushed with a speed that belied his awkward build. His timing was superb and a she-coyote seemed to flatten in the ribs at the terrible impact of that powerful ramming head.

The young sheep-herder, Mart Gibbon, froze in his tracks as he glimpsed the antelope bucks and his lead ram, together with an old doe of the antelope band, hurl themselves into united action on the biggest raiding family of coyotes Mart had ever seen on the sere Lost Desert range.

Today, Mart had lent his rifle to one of his father's shearers—Cy Carter. The youth now whistled to his dog, but there was no response. Usually Shep, the best trained dog on the whole of the sheep range, answered at once. In fact, seldom did he leave the flock when Mart found it necessary to absent himself. Mart had been away not longer than half an hour, making a search for a couple of strays. He had left Shep in charge of the herd, but now he was gone, unaccountably. The boy swallowed hard.

He now saw the big coyote leader, Ka-hee, leap at the big ram's throat. Mart's heart missed a beat. It would be a sad loss to the Gibbon herds if King Ramby, the prize ram, were killed. But Lak, the chieftain buck of all Lost Desert antelopes, reared and wheeled. Now he dropped, his muzzle low to the ground. He suddenly rushed and like lightning his pronged horns flashed upward. Ka-hee spun through space, blood oozing from a wound that would keep him clear of the sheep for some days. The remainder of the coyotes now scattered. One was dead and others crawled off to lick wounds. Suddenly, as he tanged the man scent, Lak snorted sharply and in a flash, the antelopes whisked off.

Mart Gibbon made a clacking sound with his tongue as he watched his big ram bound forward a few leaps to bleat. He was throating calls to Lak, his newly-found pronghorn partner of battle.

IT WAS just before sunset when Lak again saw the man creature. The buck was poised on a rise of land, as ever alert, a handsome sentinel. His fellow-creatures grazed off beyond in the lower land. Lak swung, head high, but he gave no warning signal, for he had identified the scent of this man creature as a friendly scent.

Now his beautiful big eyes picked up movement in the coulee and he watched the man stoop over an inert animal shape. Lak could not know that Mart Gibbon had in his arms the head of Shep, his dog. Shep's throat was torn. He was dead.

Not far off lay the mangled carcass of a big wether close beside which stretched a she-coyote. Shep had fought valiantly to save the stray, but by the tracks Mart could see the odds had been too heavy against him.

Mart swore softly, but bitterly. There were far too many coyotes on the range this season. Nightly, daily, they became bolder and this was only natural because this season there was a shortage of jack-rabbits and sagehens. Coyote families of last season's borning banded together. No longer did they hunt only in pairs but in groups of pairs.

Mart's eyes were moist as he got to his feet. He had raised Shep from puppyhood, training him with care and patience to the degree by which Shep was measured as the greatest local sheep dog of all time.

Now Mart looked sharply up. He gasped, then smiled softly as he glimpsed the magnificent form of Lak, the sentinel buck.

"Too bad Shep hadn't had you to pardner him in his fight," he said. "He—"

The buck suddenly reared, to spin and buckle at the forelegs as a shot reverberated. Mart Gibbon's heart seemed to miss a beat. Many was the time he could have dropped Lak stone dead with a single shot, but Mart had a deep regard for the survivors of the antelope herds, and especially for Lak.

Lake was down and Mart quivered.

"First Shep; now—you, feller," he intoned. But now his eyes widened. Lak had pulled himself to his feet and though he limped, favoring his nigh side foreleg, he managed to hobble away as Mart glimpsed and recognized a floundering man now climbing the hogback ridge Lak had vacated.

"Carter!" Mart exclaimed. But he was not surprised.

A mounting anger sent the ranch youth clambering into the open. Carter had his rifle. Mart had lent it to the shearer on the understanding that he was to steer clear of the antelope band of Lost Desert.

Now Mart whistled shrilly as Carter had the Winchester to his shoulder for another shot. Carter spun.

In a few moments, Carter snorted with anger as Mart caught up with him.

"You lied to me, Carter," the youth said sharply. "The very critter I told you to lay off, you shoot at: Lak, the last fightin' protector the little antelope band's got."

An angry leer twisted Carter's heavy face. He was older than Mart and heavier. He laid his rifle down and advanced a pace or two toward his boss' son.

"You gone plumb loco, like ever' other herder?" he questioned. "Ain't antelope an' deer critters supposed to be for men to kill an' eat? Anyhow, no squirt of a herder's goin' to call me a liar. I—"

Before Mart could get set, Carter rushed, hooking a heavy fist to the youth's mouth. Mart tottered back several steps, but managed to recover. He spat blood from his mouth; his eyes were momentarily blinded by tears of pain, but he pulled himself together. He shook his head and darted in to feint Carter's guard down. Mart's two fisted follow-up attack found a soggy target in Carter's nose and mouth. Mart was in excellent condition. And now he threw all he had into a swift, battering attack on the shearer.

Half sobbing in anger, he chopped a savage right cross to Carter's jaw.

"That's for—Lak!" he snarled, "an' now this'n for lyin' to me about your huntin'." He struck, but Carter's head ducked down. Though he scarcely saw the younger man he rushed. His head struck Mart full in the stomach. Winded, the youth toppled back, flat on his back, and Cy Carter, mouthing curses, went to work with fists and feet in a frenzied and ruthless attack which persisted even after Mart had ceased to feel the terrible blows.

At last, on his feet, Carter glanced down at the battered form of young Gibbon. A slow, leering grin split his cut mouth—a leer of gloating. There had been a moment when young Mart had almost bested him.

Carter turned. Realizing that he must now hide out and that he must have food, he thought of the wounded antelope buck. Picking up the fallen rifle, he whirled and went out along Lak's trail. But half a mile away, standing with nigh foreleg raised, Lak had his muzzle into wind and that muzzle quivered. He worked the muscles of his rump which in turn worked the flashing rump patches of hair. Danger threatened and, although wounded, Lak signalled the warning to his band.

Now he turned and limped on—toward the north where medicinal springs seeped into a marsh. More than once in his life Lak had been forced to this spot to bed down and soak his wounds in the cool, healing muck.

BACK at the Gibbon ranch Dean Gibbon, Mart's father, screwed up his forehead as he conned the west. The sun was down an hour and still there was no sign of Mart and the herd. Usually, at sunset, the sheep could be seen coming in on the home, night pasture, led by the big ram, King Ramby, acting as bell wether.

Dean called to one of his men, a young fellow just in from the hayfield.

"Best saddle up a bronc an' go see if'n you can locate Mart, Kelly," he directed. "I'll stable yore team."

Stan Kelly nodded.

"Okay, Dean. Where at was the herd grazin' today?"

"Over to antelope flats on Lost Desert, Kell. Mart figured grass had sorta took on new life recent on that range. But mebbe he had to travel much further."

Shortly, Kelly's roan was stretching over the sagebrushed prairie range. Suddenly Stan pulled up sharply on the rim of a coulee draw. His eyes widened at what he saw below—the stiff forms of Shep, the beautiful shepherd dog, a coyote and a mangled wether.

He dismounted and searched the zone for tracks. But found only old tracks of Mart and plenty of sign to show him that Shep

had fought a terrific fight against heavy odds.

It was while crouched in his examination of the draw that Kelly heard the first sound of blatting sheep. Quickly he led his horse up to the open and mounted. There were the sheep, led by the huge, well-horned American Merino fighting ram, King Ramby.

Swiftly Kelly rode on to the rear of the strung-out band and suddenly he caught sight of the form of Mart, lying propped on his two hands as though he had tried to crawl, but was stalled.

"Great sufferin' jupiter!" Kelly swore. "He must have busted a laig in a badger hole." But his opinion was quickly changed as he dismounted flying, to drop to a knee beside Mart.

"Man," he half sobbed. "You either met up wit' a black bear wit' cubs, or else some man critter pistol-whupped you. Mart! Which—one?"

Mart Gibbon raised his head wearily. His puffed up eyes could not see, but he attempted to force a grin of recognition of Kelly's voice through his badly battered mouth.

"It—it wasn't a—uh—bear, Stan," he mumbled.

Stan Kelly quivered in every nerve fibre. Save for Carter, the quarter-breed shearer, there wasn't a man at the Gibbon ranch who hadn't the deepest regard for young Mart.

"Carter!" Kelly clipped. "Was it that Piute polecat done this to you, bud?"

Mart could only nod, but it was enough for Kelly. Quickly he helped Mart to his horse and tied him in the saddle. He patted the roan on the rump and sent him off.

"Can you hear me, Mart boy?" Stan asked.

The youth nodded.

"Then tell Dean I'm stayin' out on Carter's trail until I find him an' when I do—" The strong young hayer finished his sentence with a wordless grunt.

Kelly was unsuccessful in holding Carter's trail as dusk sifted down on the range. He at last turned and legged it along in the rear of the moving sheep herd.

Meanwhile, Mart Gibbon rode into the home yard as Dean emerged from the stable. Dean darted forward, untied the rope that lashed Mart to the saddle and lifted his son to the ground.

The old rancher's face distorted in a terrible expression of anger, but before he exploded he carried Mart to his room and set about help for his bruises and cuts. As he bound up Mart's cracked ribs, Dean listened to the youth's mumbled story.

"An'—you never believed me before—dad," Mart went on. "But I saw the little pronghorn chief, Lak. He was sidin' the big Merino in the fight. If on'y Shep—had—had him for a fightin'—pardner!"

Old Dean swallowed hard as he observed the moisture gathering in the boy's eyes. He realized that this did not come solely from the pain of his wounds, but from a twisting of Mart's heart at the loss of the dog.

"I'll send out an' git you the finest sheep dawg money can buy, son," Dean promised. "But first off, I aim to git Carter. If'n Kelly don't git his trail tonight, then ever' man I can spare at the ranch'll hunt him tomorrow."

Dean persuaded Mart to drink some hot coffee, and then he let the boy lie still.

KELLY had been at the head of a scouring posse for two days. They had picked up traces of Carter, only to lose the trail as the wily shearer skilfully blotted out his sign. Now and then, too, Kelly had a brief glimpse of the wounded antelope.

Lak was down this evening. He was weak from loss of blood and bedded down frequently. The bleeding had stopped, but a torn leg muscle gave him much pain.

Down in a ring of sagebrush cover, he suddenly caught a warning sound. He cautiously raised his head and his keen eyes caught the flashed signal from several rump patches.

The chieftain buck got to his feet. With all his reserve of spirit and strength he bounded forward, leaping from one sagebrush clump to another. A rifle shot exploded, the bullet cutting hair from Lak's neck.

Cy Carter was an expert shot, but he had missed and swore bitterly, for he was not unaware that the shot sound would have carried far.

Stan Kelly heard it. He wheeled his horse and ordered his helpers to spread out over the prairie. He intended to ride a direct course in the direction from which the shot had blasted.

Within a mile or so he glimpsed the wounded buck. Dismounting, he ground hitched his bronc and stole on with great

caution, for he knew that Carter, realizing he had been hunted for two days, would be tricky and not above bushwhacking.

From clump to clump Kelly moved, his rifle ready to throw down. Suddenly he started and swung. His eyes widened as he glimpsed, along his back trail, the unmistakable form of Lak.

"Well I'll be a—uh—" He swallowed the rest of his words. Incredible as it seemed, Lak had swung around to fetch in on the rear of friendly man scent. It was no wonder Mart's tales of Lak had sounded fabulous.

"Okay, boy," Kelly whispered. "You just hang an' rattle on my trail an' it'll be just too bad if that cuss Carter starts—"

The buck's head was suddenly flung high, a handsome head graced by the finest set of pronged horns Kelly had ever seen.

Kelly turned back on to Carter's trail. The buck wasn't pointing for nothing. With a suddenness that startled Kelly, Lak whistled and went bounding off at an amazing pace.

Shortly, crouched low, Stan heard a piece of deadwood crack and then a muffled oath. Carter, coming in on his back trail in an effort to outguess the buck, had caught a foot in a low slung greasewood root system. As he pitched forward, his rifle spun from his grasp. Kelly jerked himself erect and lunged forward.

"Stand yore hand, feller!" he bellowed as Carter attempted to scoop up his Winchester. "This is the end of the trail, Carter. I'd ought to pistol-whup you so you look like Mart Gibbon, but I'm goin' to leave that for Dean. . . He's waitin' for you back to the ranch, Carter. Dean—big Dean, an' he'll tear you into coyote bait."

Kelly picked up the fallen rifle and pumped it dry of its remaining shells. He now spun again on Carter.

"Okay, you rat. March! Try to make a break an' I'll salivate you."

WITH a catch rope slung on his saddle, Kelly secured Carter's wrists and, mounting, set off for the home ranch, pulling the bearded fugitive stumbling on behind.

As the aftermath of sunset was still playing on the handsome log ranch house, Stan Kelly rode into the Gibbon yard and turned his prisoner over to Dean Gibbon.

"He's all yore's, Dean," Stan said. Then, with a soft chuckle he added: "Lookit his face. Seems like young Mart give him aplenty afore this polecat fouled him somehow."

Dean Gibbon jerked the man toward him, a mounting fury ready to explode at any minute.

"I'm goin' to pay off, you mangy shearer," he boomed. "But first off, I'm takin' yuh in to take a look-see at Mart."

Mart's face was a terrible discolored and swollen mask and his breathing came in short, hard-won gasps. A medico had been sent for but might not arrive for two days.

"You see, Carter—" Dean said in a deep-throated voice, broken by a brewing emotional storm. "Now come on out, and I'll tend to you proper!"

There was just enough life left in Carter's body for him to crawl away from the Gibbon ranch. Men stood by, ready to check Dean if he resorted to a killing. But Dean was too wise for that. Even in his fury, he spared the man's life.

"If'n I hear of yuh around within' a hun-

TOPS FOR QUALITY
BIGGER AND BETTER

dred mile uh Lost Desert, I'll come gunnin' f'r yuh," were Dean's last words, as Carter painfully crawled through a fence.

Lak, the wounded buck, started from a catnap. He raised his head stiffly and with quivering muzzle tested wind, fickle wind, not easy to search.

Suddenly, at a soft throaty sound near by he sprang to his feet and limped through a patch of greasewood and sage to flank Sha, the oldest and wisest of his does. She had picked up his scent and had followed his trail. She drummed the ground with her four hoofs now—a signal that Ka-hee, their most bitter enemy, was prowling.

For the time being Sha would assume the role of leader. The rest of the band must fend for themselves. Lak, the great, the wounded, would be Sha's sole concern—Lak who, many times, had saved his band from depletion.

Suddenly Sha made a soft, thick throat sound. She leaped high in a few spirited bounds, then turned to call Lak who followed, but all at once, with another signal, Lak understood. Sha wheeled sharply off to the south west and Lak froze. He instinctively knew that the old doe was starting a decoying run in order to draw the coyote raiders off his trail.

When he had tested wind and was satisfied that he was not being trailed, Lak moved haltingly along. Daily his leg muscle was regaining strength. When he picked up the strong tang of the sheep scent, although he snuffled it from his nostrils, he moved deeper into its breath for he knew that in so doing he would find a haven of safety should danger suddenly threaten.

At dawn, a ranch hand, substituting as herder for Mart, came out to the home sheep pasture. He stopped short in his tracks, gasping aloud as he saw the beautiful antelope buck leap the pasture fence on three legs.

"Lak!" he gasped, and dashed back to tell Dean and young Mart.

Assisted by his father, Mart hobbled to a window. His eyes grew wide and his still swollen mouth toyed with a smile as he turned to look into his dad's face.

"I ain't never seen a better critter, Mart. If—uh—God dished out the brains to the wild critters same as he did to the human folks, he shore enough was kind to that little ol' fightin' buck. Boy, lookit them curved horns an' prongs. Soon comes the ruttin' season. Yore friend Lak'll have to get himself into fightin' shape because other bucks, mebbeso sensin' he's a bit off, will be in there snortin' for battle. I'd give a lot to see Lak in battle action."

DEAN GIBBON was a practical man. He'd never placed much stock in intuition. Hard, rugged, a man of the open range country, he'd had to battle against the terrific odds of resentful cattlemen before at last he could find land on which to graze his almost countless sheep.

But today, Dean wondered. He had expressed a hope to see Lak, the king buck, in battle action and as he and Mart rode along this late September evening, he was suddenly startled by a sharply whistled sound—antelope buck sound. Then came the clash of hard horn on horn.

"Bucks fightin', son!" Dean said softly. "We'd better light an' take a look-see."

Mart, now almost fully recovered, though still walking with a limp, dismounted stiffly and together he and his father moved forward, old Dean leading with all the skill and silence of an Indian.

At a fringe of wolf willows, they stopped short and Dean gripped his son's arm.

"There y'are, son," he whispered hoarsely. "Lookit! The little chief's all healed an'—he's—uh—"

Dean broke off swallowing hard as he watched Lak rear to give out a throaty blat of anger. Before him, weaving head down, blood oozing from a wound in the side of his neck, stood a young buck, a buck almost as big as Lak, but lacking the chieftain's fighting experience.

But in desperation, the young one lunged, catching Lak in the brisket, toppling him back.

Mart Gibbon cocked the hammer of his Winchester when it looked as though Lak had been careless and was now threatened with serious wounding, if not death. But Dean placed a restraining hand on the boy's near arm.

"Don't take sides, son," he whispered. "Lak's capable of—uh—" He broke off. Lak had rolled himself clear of danger as he toppled. He sprang to his four hoofs. Now, heads down, muzzles close to the ground, the bucks minced choppily forward, beautiful eyes now spilling terrible lights. The

young buck suddenly half reared, swerved to feint Lak out of position, but Lak was alert. He feinted with an upward thrust of his head. The youngster swung to evade what he thought was a direct attack on his throat. . .

Lak whipped about like lightning and with a well-timed lunge and upward thrust of his horns hooked the throat of the other and fastened on what to the men seemed like a perfect pincers hold. Now Lak put forward all his strength. Propelled by his strong hind hoofs he drove on—pressing the other back—back—and then suddenly, his powerful head jerked upward and sidewise. His inside curved prong gouged. The young buck toppled back, blood gushing from a second, more serious wound in his throat.

Lak reared, snorting shrilly. He slashed out with both fore hoofs, to send the rising youngster crashing into the willows.

Mart Gibbon had always held Lak in high regard, but never before had he had an opportunity to appraise so fully the power of his wild friend. The champion buck looked so slender, so beautifully and gracefully formed, it seemed incredible that he carried such deadly power in those four-spike horns.

A sudden soft bleating sound, more a grunt than any other tone, caused the victorious king buck to wheel. Lak gave answer in throaty call not unlike the blatting of King Ramby.

THE first whistling blizzard was a menace to both the sheep and antelope bands. Gone was the mad moon period for Lak. He was completely recovered when, at the first sign of the blizzard's abatement, he nickered to his band and took them bounding along toward the habitat of the man creatures. His keen nose had picked up the scent of Ka-hee and his roving pack of raiders.

From the sheep pastures there came the deep-throated bleating of Ramby, the big Merino. Sheep were huddled in their strange defensive circle, heads out, eyes flaming with fear and anger.

Suddenly a sharp coyote yapping sounded off toward the northeast. The band of Ka-hee, augmented by others, had split into fanwise hunting formation, in pairs.

They drove ruthlessly down in the half light and shortly a ewe went down gurgling through a slashed windpipe.

All was a mad bedlam of sound now. A half moon struggled fitfully to penetrate the cloud overcast and now and then cast a deathly glow on the pasture land as Lak and his young bucks, and one or two does ranged themselves alongside the infuriated Merino ram in as grim a battle as ever took place in the hinterland of the Lost Desert country.

At the ranch house, Mart Gibbon stirred. He called to his father and they moved out quickly, rifles in hand.

Now the moon had broken clear and from the corner of an alfalfa stack, the Gibbons watched the white-collared Lak rear, whirl and chop down at a huge coyote threatening the Merino. Before the coyote could recover from his hoof blow, Ramby charged.

It was Ka-hee, the big dog coyote leader that Lak and the ram had struck. As the big coyote rose, and attempted to whirl clear, Lak rushed him. Suddenly, the watching men gasped as an incurved prong hooked skywards. It had sunk deep into the belly of Ka-hee. There was a terrible sidewise thrust of Lak's strong head and Mart Gibbon could have sworn he saw the entrails of the king killer twine around Lak's horns.

"Okay, son, lookit!" Dean called. "Three coyotes headin' up the hill towards the bluff. Let 'em have it!"

Together father and son fired rapidly. A she-coyote buckled and rolled, stone dead, as a tribute to young Mart's marksmanship.

They heard the sharp whistles of Lak, who leaped in prodigious bounds at the rifle fire and took his band off to safety.

Mart swallowed hard as he let down the hammer of his rifle to safety half cock. He was glad. Lak and his band would be fed alfalfa and assured a haven here at the home pasture until such time as they were able to rustle again, when the snow cleared on their favorite sagebrush and buffalo grass range.

Proud, happy, Mart limped along back to the ranch house by his dad's side. He climbed back to his bed, but with determination to be out before sunrise to catch a glimpse of the victorious Lak, his prong-horn partner.

By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

CHAPTER ONE

The Man in Dirty Buckskins

SUNSET O'BANION, buckskin-clad guide of the Ohio-Western Colony's caravan, reined his bay gelding in beside Cap McDougal's lead wagon. Judy was not in the seat with her father, and disappointment stabbed O'Banion with a keen blade.

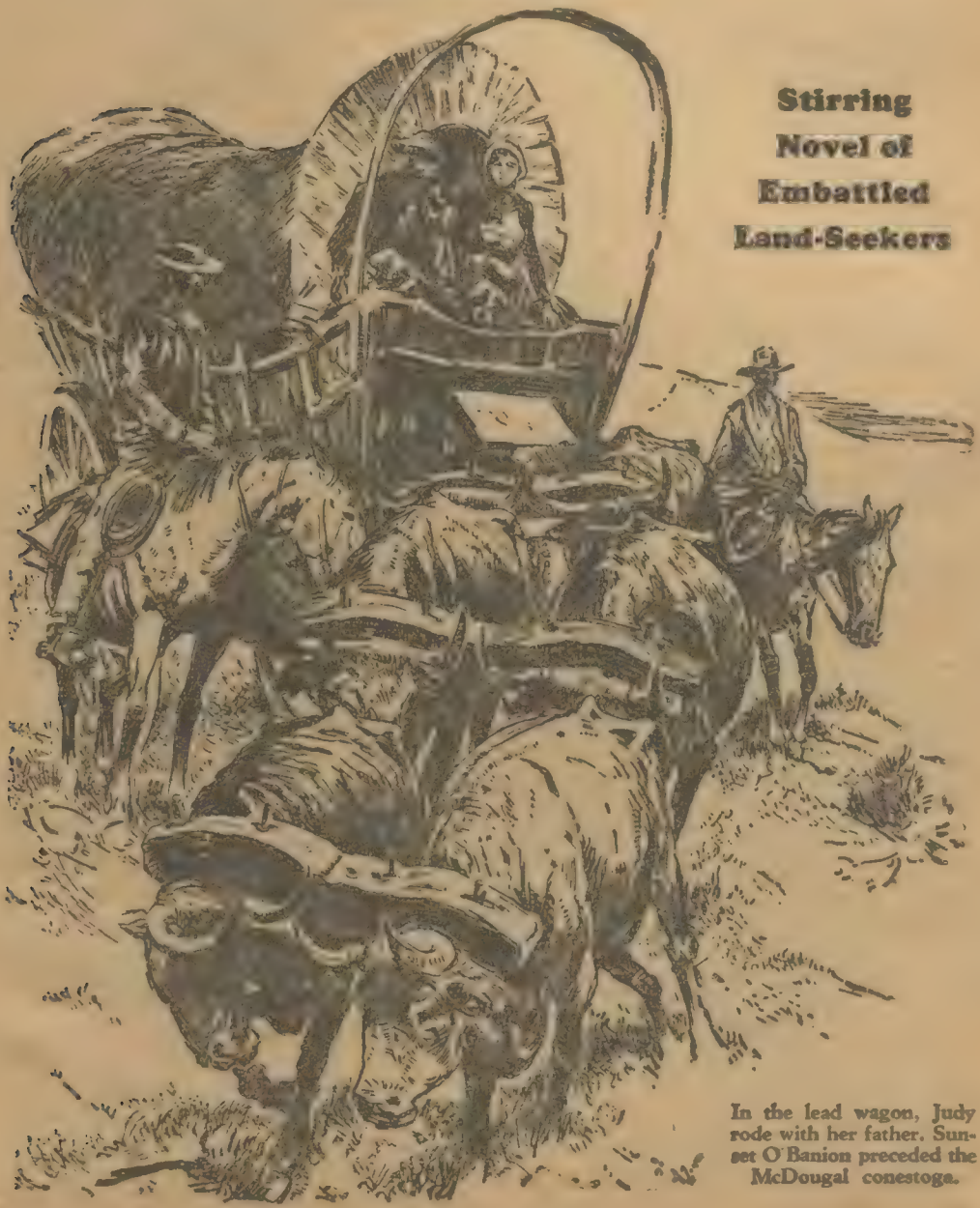
McDougal made a sweeping gesture toward the Snowy Range and on southward to the distant Spanish Peaks. "Ever seen a prettier country?" The old man sucked his lungs full of air. "Take a whiff of that ozone. We didn't make a mistake coming here, thanks to Sim Rikes and his locating committee."

They rolled out within the hour, to the measured tread of oxen hoofs and the creak of the big wagons.

Keep 'Em Rolling West

"I ain't one to beat around the bush," grated Kirk Cruse. "This is my town and my valley, and I'm not letting a bunch of damned pilgrims push me out. Savvy, O'Banion?" And Sunset O'Banion was the only member of the Ohio-Western Colony who *did* savvy—that they'd have to blaze a trail of lead and blood if they wanted to shove through Cruse's empire toward their own Promised Land.

Stirring Novel of Embattled Land-Seekers



In the lead wagon, Judy rode with her father. Sunset O'Banion preceded the McDougal conestoga.

O'Banion glanced up at the westering sun. He didn't want to argue with McDougal, but he didn't want to say anything good about Sim Rikes, either. Probably Judy was riding with him now. "A couple of hours till we camp," he said. "Keep along the river."

"Where you going?" McDougal demanded.

"Taking a little ride into the hills. I'll be back before dark." O'Banion reined his horse away from the wagon and set a fast pace toward the range of hills that stretched for miles south of Silver river.

O'Banion had been obsessed all day with the feeling that the wagon train was being watched. He knew there was little danger from the Utes, but there was a very real danger from Kirk Cruse, owner of Rancho Paradise, an imperial domain the wagon train was now invading. O'Banion had never seen Cruse, but he had heard a great deal, all of it emphasizing the cattleman's outstanding characteristic. Kirk Cruse would take any action necessary to hold the valley.

A careful two hours atop the first row of hills told O'Banion his feeling had been right. Two men had been watching much of the day. Now they were gone, their tracks pointing westward. The headquarters of Rancho Paradise lay in that direction.

It was dusk when O'Banion rode into the wagon circle. He ate supper with the McDougals as he always did, watching Judy with the same sharp interest she had aroused in him that first day he had seen her in Fort Wallace. Sim Rikes was there, too, standing on the other side of the campfire, jealous green eyes on O'Banion as if waiting for a wrong move. He'd been waiting for that wrong move from the moment they'd left the end of track at Fort Wallace.

"Where have you been, Sunset?" Judy asked.

"Riding," he answered laconically.

"When you were supposed to be with the train," Rikes said pointedly.

Everything the little man said irritated O'Banion. It was like having sandpaper rubbed against the tip of his nose. Rikes was the colony treasurer, coming west, he said, because he wanted to grow up with the country. He had worked in a bank in Ohio, and he was highly regarded by Cap McDougal, but O'Banion, whose intuition had been sharpened by years on the frontier, wouldn't have trusted him with a counterfeit nickel.

Usually O'Banion ignored the stabs of Rikes's rapier-sharp tongue, but now he saw that Judy was waiting for him to answer the little man's indirect charge. Even McDougal was listening.

"Cap could follow the river," O'Banion said sharply. "I had business on yonder hills."

"Private business perhaps," Rikes needled.

"Colony business." O'Banion brought his gaze to Judy. "Where were you when I left the train?"

"Private business." Judy gave O'Banion her back and stood stiffly by the fire.

Rikes laughed softly. "You see how it is, redhead."

O'Banion turned to McDougal. "You're the colony president, so it's rightly your affair, but until we pull into the townsite, some of the responsibility is mine. Judy shouldn't leave the train. We're just now getting into the only danger we've had since we left Fort Wallace."

"Are you going to start that again?" Rikes demanded.

"We've been watched from the hills," O'Banion said, ignoring Rikes. "My guess is that Cruse wants to find out as much as he can about us before he shows up and says to get to hell out of the valley."

"He'd better save his breath," McDougal muttered.

"It's his powder and lead we'll want him to save," O'Banion said. "Soon as it's dark I'm going into Valley City. I'll talk to Cruse if I can find him."

"No need to talk." Rikes poured a cup of coffee. "He won't like us moving in, but he can't help himself."

"Was I you, Cap," O'Banion said urgently, "I'd put a stop to Judy riding away from the train. In the first place, we might run into a band of Utes who hadn't heard they were supposed to be good Injuns. In the second place we don't know what kind of men are hanging around."

MOVING to the fire, McDougal picked up a burning twig and lighted his pipe. Straightening, he said slowly,

"You've done a good job, Sunset, bringing us straight to where we were going without trouble, but it doesn't make sense, now we're practically there, that we'd have any ruckusing. Sim thinks you're kicking up scare talk just to keep your job."

"I don't want the damned job," O'Banion snapped, anger pulling his nerves tight. "Soon as you roll into your townsite, I'm done. If you lose Judy . . ."

"I was with her this afternoon, redhead," Rikes cut in. "Even if we were not engaged, it would have been my obligation as her escort to protect her."

O'Banion winked at McDougal. He said soberly, "Cap, do you honestly think that Rikes could protect Judy from a good-sized prairie dog the way they grow out here?"

McDougal laughed. "They grow pretty big, don't they? How about it, Sim?"

Rikes drew himself up to his full height and laid an awkward hand on the butt of the big Colt he carried on his hip. "I see nothing funny about it, Captain. As for you, O'Banion, I will not stand for ridicule from a man who wears dirty buckskins and brags that he knows how to lift a scalp."

Wheeling, Rikes strode away. McDougal chuckled. "You kind of stirred him up, Sunset."

"There was no reason for it," Judy cried fiercely.

She was pretty, standing there by the fire, her hair as black as midnight, her eyes snapping in anger. O'Banion was never sure whether they were purple or blue. He said, "Rikes might have made you a fair to middling husband in Ohio. He won't out here."

"Now you're trying to tell me who to marry," Judy stormed. "I suppose your—your dirty buckskins and your talent for lifting scalps would make you a good husband."

"Stop that talk," McDougal said sternly. "Sunset has done right well for what we hired him for."

For what he'd been hired for! Anger stirred again in O'Banion. There had been that barrier from the first. He looked around the wide circle of fires, smelling the smoke that lay without motion upon a windless earth. He heard the hum of distant talk, the cry of playing children, the medley of many sounds that rise from a big camp at night.

Tomorrow he would be done. The knowledge brought its regret. Another day and he'd ride on. Judy McDougal would become Judy Rikes. They'd settle down. Rikes would keep on handling money. That was his talent. Judy would bear his children. And Sunset O'Banion would probably die, alone, among the cedars of a distant mountain side and lose his scalp to a passing band of Utes.

There was this moment of regret. Strange thoughts for O'Banion who had always looked with scorn upon those who followed the plow, strange thoughts for a man who had received the strength of the mountains and the sky and the sun because they had been his home, his roof, his heat and light.

Then the regret was gone. The desire to be on the move again throbbed within him, to see the aspen leaves in the golden glory of fall, the scarlet patches of scrub oak limned against the constant gray of the sage.

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Because he would be gone tomorrow night, and because he had wanted to do it from the moment he had first seen her lips at Fort Wallace, he yielded to impulse. Reaching for Judy, he took her into his arms. He kissed her, holding her slim body hard against his, his lips imprisoning hers and tasting the sweetness of them. She kicked his shins and tried to break free. Then the fire and anger went out of her, and she lay still in his arms and she was returning his kiss.

O'Banion let her go and stepped quickly away toward his horse. He said, "I'll be back before morning, Cap," and rode westward toward the lights of Valley City.

"I hate you," Judy cried after him. "Keep on riding and don't ever come back."

Cap McDougal, pulling steadily on his pipe, said placidly, "I reckon that was for my ears, young one. That kiss was kind of nice, wasn't it?"

"No," Judy blazed.

"What he said about Sim might be right."

"If there wasn't any other reason," Judy snapped, "I'd marry Sim just because O'Banion doesn't like him."

McDougal took the pipe out of his mouth. "Why now, for a girl who's usually pretty smart, that was a damned fool thing to say."

VALLEY CITY'S main street was a wide lane between two rows of log and adobe buildings, the yellow light from the hotel and saloons splashing out across the dust. A freight outfit was drawn up at the end of the street. A dozen horses were racked in front of the saloons, but there was no one on the boardwalks. This, Sunset O'Banion knew as he dismounted in front of the Black Ace Saloon, would be Kirk Cruse's town.

Valley City was quiet. Too quiet. O'Banion, standing at the edge of a pool of light, studied the street. Kirk Cruse would be here. Somewhere. The approach of the wagon train would have been known to him long before it entered the valley, for he was a man with a dozen eyes.

In a country where the too-daring died young and the cautious took a single look and returned to their homes, Sunset O'Banion was a man destined to leave his mark. He had an intuitive ability for sizing up a situation before he waded in. Coupled with that ability was the cold courage it took to drive the situation through to the end once he had made up his mind to wade in.

As the wagon train's guide, he was a dangerous man to Kirk Cruse. Realizing it, O'Banion measured his chances and found them slim. Cruse could not afford to let him live, but risky or not, he had to see the cowman tonight. Until he had seen and talked to Cruse, the man would remain an uncertain factor in his thinking.

O'Banion was still standing in the street darkness beside his horse when two riders came into town from the east. Racking their mounts twenty feet beyond O'Banion, they went into the Frontier Bar. As they passed through a patch of light, O'Banion saw that they were Sim Rikes and Jess Dollit, another colonist.

O'Banion swore in surprise. The colony's executive committee had issued an order before they'd left Fort Wallace that no one could leave camp at night except the guide. McDougal was a non-drinking man himself, and he was convinced that the trouble which had plagued other colonies had risen from the use of liquor. Some, including Jess Dollit, had objected to the order.

There was no going back for O'Banion until he learned the reason for Rikes and Dollit being in town. At the same time he didn't want them to think he was spying on them, so instead of following them into the Frontier Bar, he turned into the Black Ace, the smallest of the saloons whose lights called garishly into the night.

Two cowboys bellied up against the bar were the only customers in the place. Their eyes swept O'Banion's lean figure, one nudged the other, and without a word, they wheeled away from the mahogany and strode out.

The barkeep cast a jaundiced eye at O'Banion. "It's a hell of a life, mister. No man lives very long, but your life's gonna be damned short if you don't mount up and git."

It was the way O'Banion had thought it would be. Cruse had expected him to ride in, and the word had gone out to be on the lookout for him.

"I'll have a drink first," O'Banion said mildly.

The apron set bottle and glass on the bar

top. "It's your life you're gambling with, mister, but I'm guessing Cruse and Yankee Hall will be along most any time."

"I'm expecting them," O'Banion said absently, his mind seeking a reason for Rikes and Dollit being here, and not finding it.

"You are?" The apron wiped at an imaginary puddle on the bar. "I just got one thing to say, mister. You're tough or a fool. Ever see Yankee Hall pull a gun?"

"No."

"You won't, either. You'll see his hand start down. Then you'll be dead."

"Does Hall shoot everybody who comes in here?"

"He's shot enough of 'em," the apron said darkly. "He rides high and handsome because he's Cruse's man. I don't cotton to these king cowmen. A few sodbusters would be good for the country, but it ain't safe to sound off like that when Cruse is around."

THE saloonman might be following Cruse's orders in trying to bluff O'Banion out of town. Then O'Banion decided he was wrong, for Cruse came in with Yankee Hall, the two cowboys trailing behind. If it had been a bluff, Cruse would have given the saloonman more time.

Cruse was short and wide, all bone and muscle with a square head and a bristling black beard and mustache that gave him the ferocious look of a Captain Kidd or Blackbeard. He tramped to the bar and stood staring at O'Banion, black eyes hooded by bushy brows. O'Banion, his gray eyes locked with the cowman's black ones, saw that Kirk Cruse was not one to bluff.

"You're Sunset O'Banion," Cruse rumbled, "and you've guided the Ohio-Western Colony from Fort Wallace to the Silver. You've got better than eighty men and boys armed with rifles, and you're aiming to ford the river tomorrow and stop at a townsite Rikes's committee picked out last fall."

It was not the reception O'Banion had expected, nor had he expected Cruse to know so much. "You're plumb right, Cruse," he murmured.

"I ain't one to beat around the bush," the cowman went on. "This is my town and my valley, and I'm not letting a bunch of damned pilgrims push me out. Maybe some call it progress, but I say they're a bunch of rabbits who wait for us to civilize a country, and then they pour in like locusts. I aim to stop 'em. Savvy, O'Banion?"

O'Banion poured a drink and let it stand. "I've been wondering what you were like, Cruse, but I didn't figger you'd turn out to be a windbag."

Anger painted color into Cruse's cheeks. "I'm no windbag, mister. I'm talking straight because I'd like to keep you alive. I've heard about you working for the U. P. and hunting with Bill Cody, but I never heard about you guiding a pilgrim outfit before." Cruse dug a handful of gold coins out of his pocket. "If it's the money, I'll give you five hundred dollars to go to work for me. Starting now."

"I guess not," O'Banion said.

Cruse jingled the coins on the bar top. "Ever meet up with Yankee Hall?"

Yankee Hall was a cold-eyed gunman, much like a dozen others O'Banion had met in Denver, Cheyenne, Fort Benton, or any of the other places that attracted such men. Two black-butted guns were thonged low on his hips; he was as tall as O'Banion with long-fingered hands and pale blue eyes that were faintly mocking.

"I never met Yankee," O'Banion said, "but now that I have, I'll have to kill him. Or he'll kill me. That right, Cruse?"

It was Sunset O'Banion's way to keep one jump ahead of the other, and Cruse's wide face momentarily showed shock at O'Banion's tactics. Then he laughed, the sound of it like the noise of sliding gravel. "You're tough, bucko, but not tough enough to take Yankee Hall. You know that."

"I'll take him if you stay out," O'Banion said coldly. "Likewise them two pups you dragged in behind you."

Hall didn't say anything, but his pale blue eyes narrowed, his thin-lipped mouth drawing out until it became a cruel slash across his sun-blackened face.

Behind Cruse one of the cowboys cried out in protest, "I ain't gonna be called no pup, Kirk."

"Shut up, Brack." Cruse thoughtfully scratched his stubble-covered chin, doubt beginning to show on his big face. "Big talkers go to hell along with the little winds, O'Banion. I'm offering to pay you

to quit. Otherwise Yankee will smoke you down if you're bent on hanging on and rattling."

"I must be pretty important, coming in for your personal attention."

"You're damned right. With you leading 'em, that bunch of pilgrims might be tough. I'd rather scare 'em home than fight 'em, but I'll make 'em run someway, no matter what happens to you or Yankee Hall or anybody else."

Cruse's words were cold, plain, and as merciless as the man himself. O'Banion had wondered what kind of mettle was in the man. Now he knew. It was hard bright steel charged with a bold arrogance and shrewd cunning that made Kirk Cruse a hard man to beat. O'Banion smiled as he thought of Cap McDougal or Sim Rikes trying to stand against the cowman.

"How did you find out so much about us?"

"My business."

"What did Jesse Dollit and Sim Rikes want in the Frontier Bar?"

Cruse held his answer a moment as if exploring the motives that prompted the question. Then he said, "No reason I should know."

"I came to town to see you," O'Banion said, "figgering we'd better talk things over."

"Nothing to talk over, Cruse said truculently. "Good or hot lead will stop anything." He picked up the coins and dropped them into a jingling pile. "Which do you want, O'Banion?"

"Neither. I'm taking the train across the river. Then I'm done."

Cruse shook his head, grudging admiration in his eyes. "It takes more'n guts to tackle me on my home range, bucko." He motioned to Hall. "Your play, Yankee."

The cowboys behind Hall dived for the bar. Cruse remained at the mahogany, a great hand cupped over the gold coins, watching the death drama as dispassionately as he would watch a butcher slaughter a beef. It was that merciless. That cruel.

Regret was in Sunset O'Banion. He had never killed a man unless there had been a real issue between them. Now he would kill or be killed by a man against whom he held nothing. He said, "You're a fool to die this way, Yankee. Cruse figgers your chances ain't good, or he wouldn't have that handfull of dinero on the bar."

Hall stood motionless for a moment, perhaps giving thought to O'Banion's words, but he was not a man to think long about anything. He was a killing machine. O'Banion watching him closely, saw the man's mouth open, lips springing away from smoke-yellowed teeth, saw the glassy glitter of his eyes, heard a long breath saw into the oppressive quiet. Then Hall's hand swept downward for his gun.

O'Banion, reading the man's face, had caught the moment of action, and made his own draw. Powder flame stabbed smoky red tongues into the lamplight; the thunder of both guns beat against the walls of the little room and was thrown back in slowly dying echoes.

There had been the breath of Hall's bullet against O'Banion's cheek, but it was more than a breath that Hall felt if he had felt anything. O'Banion saw the man lurch, watched him begin to bend as the heavy gun tumbled from his hand, saw disbelief break across the narrow face, the final wild grasping at life. Then it was gone, and Yankee Hall lay on the floor, his face lax in the looseness of death.

The echoes of the shots were gone. There remained only the nostril-piercing smell of burned powder and Hall's body. Cruse's two riders peered over the bar, and stood motionless, shocked into immobility when they saw that O'Banion was alive.

There was no change of expression on Kirk Cruse's big face. He said coldly, "You were right, O'Banion. Yankee was a fool to die that way, but a lot of them do. You can buy them for a month's wages, and I guess they were born for nothing better."

O'Banion's gun slid back into leather. "Maybe you were born for the same," he murmured.

"I'm a slow hand with a gun," Cruse said. "That's why I hire my fighting done, but I'll have your hide, bucko, in my own way and time."

O'Banion backed to the door, knowing Cruse's refusal to fight did not indicate a weakness in him. It was simply the dispassionate way he had of looking at things. There would be no breaking in him short of death.

O'Banion went out fast, hit the saddle and laced two bullets through the batwings to discourage pursuit. Then he was feeding

steel to his horse. He had failed in half his purpose, O'Banion was thinking as the lights of Valley City fell behind. He had wanted to measure Kirk Cruse, and he had succeeded, but he was as far as ever from knowing why Dollit and Rikes were in town.

CHAPTER TWO

Blocked Ford

O'BANION had overlooked Jess Dollit, had failed to consider the sinister possibilities that might lie in a connection between the man and Kirk Cruse. Now, rolled up in his blanket, his eyes open and staring at a brightly starred sky, O'Banion gave some thought to Dollit.

Jess Dollit claimed to have been a Forty-Niner. He'd made his pile in California and lost it. He'd been in Colorado in Fifty-nine, had been lucky a second time, had gone back to Ohio and lost his fortune again. Now a dour silent man, Jess Dollit had joined the colony because he liked the cooperative idea, or so he said.

Thinking carefully about the journey since the wagon train had left Fort Wallace, O'Banion saw a significance in Dollit's talk that had escaped him before. Dollit had said very little, but everything he had said was critical of O'Banion's or McDougal's leadership. There were those among the colonists who gave weight to Dollit's words because he was the only man in the caravan except O'Banion himself who had had any considerable experience in the West.

One thing stirred O'Banion's mind with irritating insistence. Kirk Cruse had known too much about the wagon train to have learned it from his men who had been spying from the hills. The information must have been given him by Rikes or Dollit in the Frontier Bar.

It was bad enough to have a traitor in camp, but the blind optimism of the colonists made it worse. Nobody from McDougal on down would believe that they faced any real danger now that they were almost within reach of their destination. O'Banion went to sleep, seeing only deepening trouble ahead, and almost immediately, it seemed, the camp burst into life.

Judy was bending over her cooking fire when O'Banion came up to the McDougal wagon. Seeing O'Banion, she straightened, and said sourly, "I'd like to tell you something, Mr. O'Banion, if you're still gloating because you kissed me. I'm not a squaw you can steal, and just because you've been with Indians most of your life is no reason you need to act like one around a white woman."

O'Banion shrugged. "Women are all alike, I reckon, if you scratch their hide a little."

"If I tell Sim what you did . . ."

"He'd pull his gun and shoot me, wouldn't he? Better not tell him, Judy. You and me were born to get married, and you'd have to be an old maid if Sim killed me."

"Me marry you?" Judy cried in shocked surprise. "I hate you, Sunset O'Banion. I would be an old maid before I married you."

O'Banion grinned. "You sure think that kiss was important. I'd forgotten all about it."

"Oh." She stared at him, wide-eyed.

"Where's Cap?"

Judy motioned toward the horses. "Out there."

Cap McDougal glowered when O'Banion came up. "Drank your belly full last night, did you?"

"No drinking, Cap," O'Banion said sharply, sensing the influence of Sim Rikes' tongue. "I met up with Cruse. We'll have real trouble today."

"Hell, we're almost there." McDougal pointed to the river. "All we've got to do is to cross over."

"Pass the word along for your men to have their rifles handy."

McDougal was not convinced. O'Banion turned away, feeling a distrust in the colony president that was not like him. Nothing more could be done until Cruse showed his hand. Mounting, O'Banion rode around the circle of fires until he came to Rikes' wagon.

O'Banion stepped down. Without a word of greeting, he demanded, "What were you and Dollit in town last night for?"

"I wanted a drink."

O'Banion gripped a handful of the man's shirt and twisted it. "I don't have time to listen to your lies. I want to know if you and Dollit talked to Cruse."

Rikes attempted to break free, and when he found that he could not, he mumbled, "I wouldn't know Cruse if I saw him."

"Dollit?"

"I talked to some men at the bar. I don't know who they were."

O'Banion, staring down at the little man, felt only contempt. He said, "If you've sold us out to Cruse, I'll kill you."

Fear shadowed the little man's face, but he had the bottom it took to say, "You've got no stake in the colony, and we can ford the river without your help. Draw your pay and get out."

"I guess you'd like that," O'Banion grunted and wheeling away, wondered how Judy could believe she was in love with Sim Rikes.

They rolled out within the hour. The breeze that rustled down from the high westward peaks carried a dawn chill. Sunlight flowed across the valley in steadily deepening waves and the air was filled with the sound and the smell of the river. It was running bank full, dirty and cold, and if it had not been for the ford above Valley City, would have been a nearly impassable barrier between the wagon train and the townsite.

Riding beside the McDougal wagon, O'Banion watched the grass ripple as it was fretted by the wind, saw the alternating patches of shadow and light as the sun was covered and then released from a mask of ragged clouds. He heard the plop of oxen hoofs in the dirt, the rumble and creak of the big wagons. These things were in the fringe of his consciousness. Centering it was Judy McDougal, sitting stiff-backed on the seat within ten feet of him, staring straight ahead, her presence chilling the air around her.

If it had not been for an innate sense of responsibility, Sunset O'Banion would have ridden off, but he was not a man to duck an issue or leave a job undone. Besides, he felt a pity for these people, pilgrims in a wild, primitive land who could not understand what it meant to live unprotected by an impartial law.

Too, there was this hope in O'Banion that Judy did not really hate him. His eyes kept turning to her, seeing the frozen line of her mouth, the defiant tilt of her chin, and he called himself a fool. Sim Rikes would not hold her love, but that did not mean there was any chance for Sunset O'Banion. Tonight his job would be done, and it was better that way.

They rolled through Valley City as the town was waking, smoke from newly made fires whipped away by the wind the instant it appeared above the chimneys. It was a naked, tawdry town, without paint and without a future, utterly different to O'Banion's eyes than it had appeared the night before when the cloak of darkness had given it a pretense of dignity. There was room here on Silver river for the new town the colonists would build, a town that would not be shackled by the grasping hand of Kirk Cruse.

"How far to the ford?" McDougal called.

"Three, four miles," O'Banion answered.

They were a mile beyond the town when O'Banion glanced back along the wagon train, twisting serpent-like behind him, canvas tops rising and falling like ships in a high wind. Surprise jolted an exclamation from him. Kirk Cruse and half a dozen of his riders were galloping toward them from town.

O'Banion had not expected Cruse to make his appearance this way. He said, "We've got trouble, Cap. Cruse is coming."

McDOUGAL and Judy stared at O'Banion, color washing out of the girl's face, the old man swearing softly. "I didn't tell the boys to have their rifles ready," he said in a guilty tone. "You reckon we're in for a fight?"

"I don't think so," O'Banion answered, "but look out for a trick."

When Cruse and his men came alongside McDougal's wagon, O'Banion swung his horse toward the river so that the cowman came between him and the lead wagon. He said darkly, "If you're busting for trouble, Cruse, you'll sure as hell get it."

"No trouble." Cruse's tone was unexpectedly affable. "We were in town when your outfit pulled through. I was just curious about where you were headed."

O'Banion swore softly. Cruse knew the answers to those questions, but McDougal didn't know that he did. It was a shrewd move, and it fooled McDougal exactly as Cruse aimed for it to.

"This is the Ohio-Western Colony,

mister," McDougal said. "We'll ford the Silver and it's our plan to settle on the north side of the river."

"That'll make us neighbors." Cruse swung in close and shook McDougal's hand. "I'm Kirk Cruse. My Rancho Paradise is upstream and to your left."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Cruse. I'm McDougal, president of the Colony." McDougal glared at O'Banion. "I had heard, Mr. Cruse, that you did not like our invasion of the valley."

Cruse laughed as if the notion were absurd. "Not at all, Mr. McDougal. Of course you understand that this valley and the hills on both side have been my winter range for years. The grama grass is as good for stock as grain. Your coming means I'll lose some of that and also a good deal of the blue joint and wild timothy in the low valleys. However, I've been expecting an invasion like this ever since the war was over."

"We won't give you any trouble," McDougal said apologetically.

"I don't expect any," Cruse said amiably, his eyes on Judy. "I would say your women will be a fine addition to our valley if Miss McDougal is a fair sample. You are Miss McDougal, aren't you?"

"My daughter Judy," McDougal said quickly.

Cruse lifted his hat. "It is not often we have such a flower in this barren land, Miss McDougal."

Judy blushed. "Thank you, Mr. Cruse."

Cruse smiled, and turned his eyes to McDougal. "This valley is open for homesteading, but there are a few quarter sections that have been filed on. I suppose your men will respect such filings."

"Of course," McDougal said quickly, ruffled by the inference.

"We have no law here such as you are used to in the East, and we've had some trouble with claim jumpers." Cruse cleared his throat, and added hesitantly, "As a matter of fact, I'm all the law there is in the valley."

"If there is any crime committed," McDougal said sharply, "and you have proof that one of our party did it, he'll be surrendered without a word."

O'Banion groaned. McDougal didn't know what he was saying.

"I'll keep that in mind." Cruse lifted his sombrero to Judy, and reined his horse away from the wagon, giving O'Banion a quick triumphant look. Then he swept on toward Rancho Paradise, his men behind him.

"That was a mighty fine reception, Sunset," McDougal said challengingly. "What have you got to say about it?"

"A skunk looks plumb purty till he makes a stink," O'Banion answered.

"I thought he was nice," Judy said. "He wasn't anything like I had pictured him after listening to you. I thought his manners were unusual."

"Unusual all right," O'Banion grunted. "It'd be unusual for a rattlesnake to climb up into your lap and start purring, wouldn't it?"

"Cruse struck me as a smart man who knows he can't stop progress and has made up his mind to get along with his neighbors." McDougal cuffed back his hat and scratched his head. "I'm thinking Sim was right about you wanting to make trouble. We'll pay you off tonight."

"To -hell with you and your whole damned outfit," O'Banion exploded. "You're like babies playing pussy wants a corner with a pack of wolves. Go ahead and play. I'll take my pay and ride. The ford's yonder. You can't miss it."

"Now hold on," McDougal soothed. "Maybe I shouldn't have said that, but after seeing Cruse, the talk you've been making just isn't sense."

"You certainly should have said it," Judy cried, "and the sooner we get settled, the less trouble we'll have."

O'Banion saw the scorn in the girl's eyes. The barrier between them had never been higher, and he called himself a fool for dreaming that someday she might love him. He said brusquely, "Let the pay go, Cap, but damn it, keep your eyes open. If you're going to let a little smooth talk fool you, you'll walk into a trap and get your heads blowed off, which same will stop Judy's silly tongue from wagging."

O'Banion wheeled his horse and rode back along the train toward Valley City. Some of the colonists waved at him, but he didn't wave back. When he reached Jess Dollit's wagon, he turned his horse and reined in beside Dollit. If the man was a traitor, what O'Banion had to say would do no harm. If not, it might do some good.

"I'm pulling out; which same makes you the only man in the outfit who's got enough savvy to know what to expect from Cruse."

Dollit was a bear of a man with a wire-sharp beard that was coal-black and tiny, red-flecked eyes that never seemed fully open. Now a laugh rumbled out of him. "I wondered how long you'd stick. You was a fool to turn Cruse's offer down last night."

"I'm not the kind of a hairpin he wants," O'Banion said grimly. "You see the pilgrims stay out of trouble."

Dollit leered at O'Banion. "Get the McDougal girl out of your head. She wants the little banker."

"She can have him." O'Banion pulled his horse around and rode on to Valley City, convinced that the colonists would get no help from Jess Dollit.

O'Banion told himself he should have expected this. He was nothing more to the McDougals than a man in dirty buckskins who knew how to lift a scalp. Bitterness was an acid in him. He shouldn't have taken the job in the first place. He should have quit days ago. Judy was a spoiled brat who had missed too many spankings when she was a kid. Let them get into trouble. Cap and a few more would get killed, and the rest would roll back to Fort Wallace like whipped pups with their tails down.

O'Banion racked his bay in front of the Black Ace and stalked in. He called for a bottle. The barkeep cocked his head. "You look sore, mister." He shoved a bottle and glass at O'Banion. "Or maybe Cruse scared you."

"I quit."

"Yeah, I know how it is to live in Cruse's town and crawl on your belly if you want to stay in business." The barman shook his head. "I'm kind of surprised, though. After what you did to Hall I thought you had the guts it took to fight the boss man."

"I quit, I told you," O'Banion grated. Picking up the bottle and glass, he stamped to one of the two tables along the wall.

O'BANION took three quick drinks. They didn't help. He'd quit in a burst of anger. He should have stuck, no matter what Rikes or Judy or Cap McDougal said. What he had done was the same as shoving a bunch of calves into a slaughter pen. Before Cap caught onto Cruse, it would be too late to save the colony.

O'Banion tried to tell himself he didn't give a damn about the colony. Sodbusters should stay home where they belonged. Where they could call the sheriff when they needed him.

But none of O'Banion's arguments helped. He couldn't get rid of the steady nagging that was his conscience. He'd never quit a job before. Not when it was getting into the tough part. He should have swallowed his pride and stuck with his contract until the colony was across the river.

Another drink only fed the discontent that was in Sunset O'Banion. The pretty heart-shaped face of Judy McDougal kept bobbing up before him. He didn't like the way Kirk Cruse had looked at her. He should have killed Cruse.

But Judy had told him she hated him. He shut his eyes. She was glad to see him go. She wouldn't want him to come back. But her face was still there. Funny. He should be able to get rid of her. He swung an open-handed palm across the table. It didn't help. She was still there. Then he was remembering something else. The sweetness of her lips. It was a haunting memory that he could never entirely forget.

"Sunset."

O'Banion's eyes came open. He'd been asleep. He shook his head, and reached for the bottle. It was gone. He looked up. Cap McDougal was standing there.

"We need your help, Sunset. I'm asking you to come back."

O'Banion stared at McDougal, the fog slowly rising from his brain.

"Are you too damned drunk to understand?" McDougal shouted. "I want you to come back."

"Why should I?" O'Banion grunted.

"Because we're a bunch of babes in the woods like you said. We need you."

O'Banion got up. He swung his chair in front of him and leaned on it. "Cap, I've taken a hell of a lot from Rikes. Judy skinned the hide right off me. You wouldn't believe me when I told you what you were headed into. You believed Rikes' talk that I wanted to hang onto a damned poor job, which was nursing a pilgrim out-

fit along when they should have been home. Now Cap, I'm waiting to hear a good reason for me going back, and it'd better be a hell of a lot better one than what I just heard."

McDougal wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. "All right, Sunset." Turning, he stalked out, shoulders slack.

"You haven't got the guts it takes, mister, to fight Kirk Cruse," the barman said contemptuously. "If you did, this would be the time to do it, most of his men being in the high country with his cattle."

O'Banion got up and followed McDougal out. He wasn't sure why he did except that he kept thinking of the way Cruse had looked at Judy. He stepped into the saddle and caught up with McDougal. He asked, "What's wrong?"

"We can't get across the river."

"Hell, the ford was right ahead of you."

"We found the ford all right, but another man named Brack Verling found it first. He's homesteaded on this site, and he wants five thousand dollars to let us cross his land. A second fellow named Duke Benbow has got the other side, and he's asking for another five thousand."

CHAPTER THREE

A Traitor in Camp

THE colony men were standing in groups beside the caravan while O'Banion and McDougal rode by. Many of them had rifles in their hands. They were puzzled and bitter, and O'Banion felt a new, grim purpose in them.

Half a dozen men were gathered at Dollit's wagon. O'Banion heard the big man say, "If McDougal had the guts of a rabbit, we'd ride over that hombre and fill him full of lead."

McDougal reined up. He said sharply, "I'll hear no more of that talk, Dollit, or we'll drum you out of the wagon train. I told Cruse we'd respect the previous filings that had been made in the valley. I aim to see that we do."

"All right, Cap." Dollit stood spread-legged, his jaw set stubbornly. "You're still runnings things, but it won't be long if we have to sit here. The boys are ready for something to happen."

McDougal and O'Banion rode on, the colony president breathing hard. As they passed McDougal's wagon, O'Banion saw that Sim Rikes was there talking to Judy. Rikes kept his back to O'Banion, but Judy looked up and smiled.

The ford was directly ahead now. The river was wide here, flowing swiftly over a gravel bottom. A man chopping cottonwood logs at the edge of the stream stopped and leaned on his ax when O'Banion and McDougal rode up. It was then that O'Banion recognized him as one of the cowboys who had been in the Black Ace with Cruse the night before.

"So you're Brack Verling." O'Banion stepped down. "What got you into the notion of turning homesteader?"

Verling was a bowlegged, run-of-the-mill cowboy who handled an ax as awkwardly as most men handle a rope. He sat down on the log and rolled a cigarette, eyeing O'Banion worriedly as if uncertain what to expect. His sun-puckered eyes moved from O'Banion to McDougal and back. Finally he muttered, "A man don't get ahead nursing cows all his life."

"How much did Cruse pay you to do this job?"

"Nothing." Verling kicked at the cottonwood limb. "I quit him this morning."

"You're a liar," O'Banion snapped.

Verling threw his cigarette away and started to get up, his fists clenched. He sat back, his eyes on O'Banion's .45. "You ain't gonna suck me into no gun fight. Not after seeing what you did to Yankee Hall."

"This ford's been free for years." O'Banion came around the log. "I doubt like hell that you ever filed on this land."

"I filed all right," Verling said defiantly. "Sure Cruse paid me, which same don't change anything. You've got gold in that wagon train. Shell out if you want to cross here."

"We can't afford to pay what you ask," McDougal snapped. "We've got a dozen places for all the gold we're carrying. Ditches. Buildings. A gristmill."

"Makes me no never mind. You can't go through without paying."

"Suppose we go through anyhow?"

Verling grinned. "Why, I'd just call Mr. Cruse, which would mean bad luck for you, seeing as he's the judge, jury, and sheriff in this valley."

"Tell Cruse it won't work." O'Banion stepped up. "Come on, Cap. We'll make camp."

"We've got to get across," McDougal growled.

"We will. Right below what this hairpin says is his land. Once you get to where you're going, Cruse can't touch you legally, and he wants to keep this legal so that he'll be in the clear if the territorial officials have to make an investigation."

"We can't swim our horses in that torrent."

"We've got to, Cap. I'm going down now to see what it looks like below here. Then I want to talk to your council after supper."

O'Banion rode downstream while the train curled into a wide circle. It was evening when he returned, tired, wet, and hungry. Crossing the Silver would not be easy. Judy saw him, and called, "Supper's ready, Sunset."

Dismounting, O'Banion said coolly, "I didn't think you'd let a man in dirty buckskins eat here any more. Or did you decide you needed me?"

Judy gave him a straight look. "We all need you, Mr. O'Banion, and if you're going to be any good to us, you'll have to eat."

"You're more honest than some of the others in this outfit," O'Banion murmured.

Sim Rikes came to the McDougal wagon shortly after supper. The three other members of the colony council, Chris Jensen, Otto Benz, and Jake Van Sickle, trailed in one at a time. O'Banion did not know them well, but he pegged them, Benz particularly, as solid, hard-headed farmers.

"I want Jess Dollit here," O'Banion said.

All except Rikes showed puzzlement. Rikes' green eyes wavered uncertainly for an instant as if battling a desire to flee. Then he said between clenched teeth, "I'll go and get him."

It was the way O'Banion had thought it would go. Rikes might not be tied up with Dollit, but he was worried about last night's trip to Valley City.

They stood around the McDougal campfire, smoking and talking little. When Rikes and Dollit emerged from the dusk, McDougal said, "We're in a hell of a fix, gents. We might as well make up our minds to that, and listen to what Sunset's got to say."

"Does your sending for me," Dollit cut in, "mean that I've got a right to my say?"

McDougal's eyes sought O'Banion's, and when O'Banion nodded, McDougal grunted, "Go ahead, Jess."

"Everybody in this wagon train knows I haven't trusted O'Banion from the first." Dollit was a square shape beside the fire, the flames throwing a shifting light across his bearded face. "Likewise I don't think McDougal is the man for the job. I was outvoted on him, and this is the first time I've had a chance to have my say on O'Banion."

"Vell, I t'ink you've said too much," Otto Benz said.

"I'll have my say and be damned," Dollit rasped. "Here we're losing time, camped with nothing but the river between us and the townsite. Why? Because McDougal like a chicken-livered baby says we've got to sit here listening to one man who claims he owns the land on this side of the ford. I say to drive through."

"The minute you do that," O'Banion said sharply, "you'll give Cruse the excuse he wants to make some arrests. He'll take the council and me, and you can bet we'll never get back alive. The colony will fall apart and go back, which is what Cruse is working for."

"Hell, Cruse can't hurt us," Dollit snarled. "We're too big."

"I've kept my mouth shut because Cap trusted Rikes more than he did me," O'Banion said, addressing Jensen, Benz and Van Sickle. "Now the time has come to talk."

"Yah." Benz nodded his shaggy head. "Our ears are already open yet."

"First thing tomorrow we'll start pulling in some dry cottonwood logs. We'll have to raft some of our stuff over. Once we're across Verling and Benbow will give up their homesteads. I've been in the water below here. The river's cold and fast, but it's got a hard bottom and I'm pretty sure we can make it."

"And drown our women and kids when we've got a ford under our nose," Dollit snarled.

IGNORING the big man, O'Banion told them the wagon train had been spied upon the day before and what had happened in town. He finished with, "Rikes was out here with the locating committee last fall. Dollit was here in fifty-nine. He may have known Cruse then. One or both of them are in cahoots with Cruse."

"You're a damned liar," Dollit bellowed. "If anybody's been selling the colony out, it's you. You were out in the hills yesterday. You were in town last night. Now you're trying to get us drowned."

"That's right," Rikes echoed. "What were you sashaying out into the hills for? What were you doing in town?"

"There's no reason I should answer to you." O'Banion faced McDougal. "We'll be several days getting across, which same is time enough for Rikes and Dollit to hatch up trouble. They broke your rule about going to town. What are you going to do?"

"We've got to have discipline," McDougal said uneasily.

Dollit jerked off his gunbelt and handed it to Rikes. "I'm going to ram some of your lies down your throat, O'Banion," he snarled.

O'Banion unbuckled his belt and swung it to McDougal. Dollit was on him without further warning, huge fists swinging. O'Banion, twenty pounds lighter, gave with the charge. Pivoting, he let Dollit rush by, swinging a fist to the side of the man's head.

Dollit wheeled back. This time O'Banion tried to hold his ground. The fury that had piled up through these last hours was a driving force in him, finding release in each wicked exchange of blows. Dollit fought like a bull, using his weight to force O'Banion back, trying to connect with one solid knockout punch.

Slowly O'Banion was forced to retreat, fists flashing rapier-like to Dollit's head; closing an eye, flattening his nose and bringing a gush of blood, splitting a lip against yellow teeth. It was bull rushes on Dollit's part, none accomplishing his purpose, but O'Banion, fighting coolly and craftily, was achieving his.

There was the thud of fists on meat and bone, the scuff of feet in the dirt, the grunts and sighing breaths of men striving for wind that never fully came. Word of the fight had spread, and the circle of spectators had steadily deepened around the two men.

It was entirely O'Banion's fight until Sim Rikes stuck out a foot and tripped him. It came when O'Banion was warding off another rush. As he started to fall, Dollit's big right fist caught him on the side of the head with a stunning club-like blow.

For an instant the world was a spinning nightmare of blazing lights and distant sounds. The ground came up to meet O'Banion. He lay there for an instant, and as if from a great distance he heard McDougal cry out, "Watch him, Sunset."

Instinctively O'Banion rolled away. Dollit brought his knees down into the dirt, intending to smash O'Banion's ribs, but O'Banion's blows had taken their toll from the big man, and Dollit was a second slow.

O'Banion came to his feet, straining for breath, his head gradually clearing. Dollit was still on his hands and knees. A man yelled, "Boot him, O'Banion." But O'Banion waited until Dollit had gained his feet. Then he was after the big man, fists tearing Dollit's guard down, hammering him in the face. He felt his own need to end the fight. There had been only the one solid blow, but it had been almost enough.

It was O'Banion now who carried the fight to Dollit, closing with him and battering him in the stomach and ribs, taking blows that had lost their sting. He gripped Dollit around the middle and threw him against the wheel of McDougal's wagon. Dollit reeled, a pawing fist catching O'Banion in the face. O'Banion, close now, drove a wicked upswinging blow to Dollit's chin. The big man folded, power washing out of him. He spilled forward into the dirt.

O'Banion sleeved sweat and blood from his face. Seeing that Dollit wasn't moving, he swung to Rikes and catching him by both shoulders, shook him. "You'll tell the truth," he grated, "or I'll forget you're a runt."

"I don't know anything," Rikes shrilled. "We went to town to get drinks. I played poker and Dollit stayed at the bar. I don't know who he talked to, and I don't know Cruse."

It might be the truth, and O'Banion was tired and hurt. He shoved Rikes away and turning to McDougal, took his gun belt. He said, "Maybe you'll know what to do now." Shouldering an opening in the wall

of men, he lurched away into the deepening dusk.

NEAR midnight two shots slammed into the silence, so close that one might have been the echo of the other. O'Banion, rolled in his blanket outside the wagon circle, sat up, his sleep-fogged mind awakening to reality. There was a stirring in the camp. Lanterns were lighted, and as O'Banion threw gear on his horse, he saw McDougal leading a line of men toward the river.

Lights had come to life across the ford, and Kirk Cruse bellowed, "What happened?"

A warning chill raveled along O'Banion's spine. It was too pat, Cruse camping with Duke Benbow on the other side of the river and calling out as quickly as he had. O'Banion was in the saddle, his gun palmed when he saw McDougal set his lantern down near the cottonwood logs that Brack Verling had cut. McDougal knelt on the ground, and came erect a moment later as Cruse and his men rode across the river.

"What happened?" Cruse demanded again.

"Your man Verling is dead," McDougal told him. "Shot in the chest."

The exclamation of surprise that was jolted out of Cruse sounded real enough. He raged, "I'll get the killer if I have to go to hellenback."

"You won't have to go that far," Sim Rikes said. "O'Banion did it."

This was it, then. A trap for Sunset O'Banion! Cruse would still be inside the law when he killed O'Banion for Verling's murder.

"Where is O'Banion?" Cruse shouted.

"He'd be gone by now," Rikes said. "He's too smart to hang around after he's killed a man."

It was a dark night, with no moon and only the stars to give a thin light to the earth. McDougal asked the question that was in O'Banion's mind, "How could you see Sunset, Sim?"

"He was sleeping just a little ways from my wagon," Rikes said glibly. "I heard him moving around. Then he headed toward the river, and a minute later I heard the shooting."

"That doesn't prove anything," McDougal said angrily.

"Proves enough," Cruse said. "I'm going through your outfit looking for him, and when I get him, he'll be dancing on nothing and looking at the stars."

"You aren't looking through my wagon train this time of night," McDougal snapped.

"Maybe you're wanting trouble?" Cruse asked harshly.

This might be the excuse Cruse wanted. It was up to O'Banion to stop him. Earing back the hammer of his gun, he sent a bullet over Cruse's head, and before the echoes had died, he shouted, "You don't need to look far, Cruse." Swinging his horse, he put him into a run toward Valley City.

"A hundred dollars to the man who shoots him out of his saddle," Cruse roared.

It would be suicide to ride into Valley City and fight the wolf pack, and it would be playing into Cruse's hand to seek refuge in the wagon train. So O'Banion took the only other course he could. He curried his horse with steel, and with surprise and darkness favoring him, was hidden by the night before Cruse's men were in the saddle and in motion.

O'Banion swung close to the river, and reined up in the cottonwoods. Dismounting, he stood by his horse's head, Colt in his hand while the pursuit thundered by. He waited long minutes, expecting Cruse to return and search more carefully. If he did, O'Banion would have to toll him away from the caravan. A night fight could only result in disaster for the colony. The showdown, when it came, would have to be at a time and place of O'Banion's choosing if the colonists were to stand a chance against Cruse's salty hands.

When O'Banion was convinced that Cruse was not coming back, he mounted and rode to the camp. McDougal had built up a fire, and was standing beside it as O'Banion reined his horse around a wagon. Otto Benz, hurrying toward McDougal, called, "That Dollit feller. He is already gone yet."

"You sure, Otto?" McDougal demanded. He saw O'Banion then, and a sigh of relief broke out of him. "Maybe you can see some sense to this, Sunset. Why would Dollit vamose and leave his outfit here?"

"Maybe he got scared, or maybe he finished his job." O'Banion's eyes searched

the circle of faces, and saw that Rikes was not there. "Where's Rikes?"

"In his wagon," McDougal answered. "I figured we'd better rouse the camp and be ready to make a fight if Cruse came back to hunt for you. Rikes begged off saying he was sick."

"He's gonna be sicker," O'Banion said grimly, and swung down.

O'Banion picked up a lantern and strode toward Rike's wagon, the others straggling behind him, puzzled and uncertain. O'Banion climbed into the wagon and gripping Rikes by a shoulder, hauled him out of bed and dumped him to the ground.

"Why did you tell Cruse I killed Verling?" O'Banion demanded, jumping down beside the little man.

Rikes sat up, staring at O'Banion as if he was the last man he expected to see. He whimpered, "I thought you did."

O'Banion jerked Rikes to his feet and slapped him across the face. "You're lying. Cruse wanted a good excuse to get me, and you gave it to him. Likewise you kicked up enough rumpus for Dollit to get out of camp without being seen. Why?"

"I don't know." Rikes cowered against the wagon. "I don't know."

O'Banion raised his hand to hit Rikes again, and dropped it as an idea came to him. He said, "Cap, Cruse wanted to get me because he figgered you'd be easier to lick with me out of the way, but he didn't come back, so he must have hit on something better."

"I don't know what it would be." McDougal put a hand to his face, bewildered eyes on O'Banion.

"Verling said you had money in the wagon train. How much, Cap, and where is it?"

"Twenty thousand in gold. Rikes keeps it in his wagon."

"See if it's there," O'Banion ordered.

"It's there all right," Rikes said stiffly. "Nobody but Cap and me knew where I kept it."

"I'm guessing Dollit knew," O'Banion grated. "Get up there and look."

McDougal picked up a lantern and climbed into the wagon, Rikes reluctantly following. Lifting the lid of a heavy oak chest, they removed a layer of clothes, and then raised a cumbersome metal box. Rikes unlocked it and threw back the lid.

"Rocks," McDougal raved. "Nothing but damned rocks." He grabbed Rikes by the shoulder and shook him. "What happened? By hell, you'll talk or I'll kill you."

"I don't know," Rikes squealed. "I haven't looked for several days."

"Dollit likely done this job a day or so ago, Cap," O'Banion said. "He didn't have time tonight. What I'm wondering is why he didn't slope out when he got the gold?"

"Yah." Otto Benz nodded. "Maybe he had more business yet."

McDougal jumped to the ground. "What else would he want?"

"It's a proposition of what Cruse would want, Cap." O'Banion paused, and then added grimly, "I saw him look at Judy this morning."

THERE was a stricken expression on McDougal's face when the meaning of O'Banion's words broke through to his consciousness. He grabbed a lantern and ran back to his wagon. When O'Banion and the rest came up, he was standing at the tailgate. "She's gone," he whispered.

O'Banion took the lantern out of his hand and raising it, looked inside. He said, "There's a note, Cap."

McDougal crowded against him, reached for the paper, and read it. Without a word he passed it to O'Banion.

"What does it say?" one of the men called.

"'Your girl will be safe if you turn around and head back to where you came from,'" O'Banion read. "'She'll be delivered to you at Fort Wallace.'"

O'Banion crumpled the paper and threw it away. He said ominously, "Get a rope, Cap. I'm done fooling with Rikes."

"I'm ready to talk," the little man whispered. "I though taking the gold was all they aimed to do."

"We're listening," O'Banion snapped.

"I stole some money from the bank where I was working in Ohio," Rikes said in a low tone. "Dollit gave me enough to pay it back. I guess it came from Cruse. Dollit had met him out here in fifty-nine, and he knew Cruse wouldn't want us in the valley, so he wrote to Cruse and offered to smash things. Dollit was supposed to get the colony's gold, and Cruse was going to protect him."

Rikes cleared his throat. "I had to do

what Dollit said, Cap. If I hadn't, he'd have told you about taking the money, and I'd have lost my treasurer's job. I wanted to run the bank out here, I loved Judy, and I wanted to give her a good home, and I kept hoping that something would happen to Dollit before he told anybody . . ."

"Keep talking," O'Banion snapped.

"Dollit told Cruse you'd quit. He said we'd turn back when we hit the river. If that didn't work, Dollit was to make a disturbance so he could get the gold. That's why he killed Verling the way he did, and he must have taken Judy when we were down there."

"That don't smell right," O'Banion said. "Cruse wouldn't have Verling killed just to make a disturbance."

"Verling was scared. He was going to pull out, and they were afraid of what he'd tell."

"Get the rope, Cap," O'Banion said.

"Killing Sim won't get Judy back," McDougal muttered.

"We'll tie him up for tonight. Your council can decide later what to do with him. Right now we'll divide the men. Half will stay here to guard the camp. Put your younger men who can ride the best on horses."

"What are you figuring on?" McDougal asked.

"Get a move on," O'Banion snapped. "We're riding to Rancho Paradise."

CHAPTER FOUR

Guns Sound at Dawn

THEY were grim-faced men who threw gear on their horses and assembled at McDougal's wagon, their women beside them. O'Banion, running his eyes around the half circle, read fear in their eyes. These men had come to farm, not to fight, and compared to the salty crew that rode for Rancho Paradise, they were a sorry lot.

"This job we're doing is for more than getting Judy and the gold back," O'Banion told them grimly. "A man like Cruse won't quit as long as he's alive. You'll never have homes in this valley unless he's finished."

O'Banion mounted and rode out of the wagon circle, motioning for the others to follow. There were the last embraces, the last kisses. Then they were on the march.

"How far yet?" McDougal asked just before dawn.

"Almost there." O'Banion turned in his saddle. "No noise and no lights. Pass the word back."

"But if Judy gets killed . . ." McDougal began.

"Suppose we don't make the try?" O'Banion demanded. "You can't go back, Cap. You're a long ways from Ohio and you're broke. Or if you did give up, how do you know you'd see Judy in Fort Wallace?"

"I don't," McDougal admitted grudgingly.

"Cruse has been purty slick staying inside of what he calls the law, but he made a mistake when he took Judy. That'll make these boys fight if nothing else would."

"They'll fight," McDougal muttered, "which means I'm responsible for a lot of lives besides Judy. We haven't got a chance against the kind of men Cruse has got anyhow."

"If your men don't want a home bad enough to fight for it, they don't deserve it, and it ain't always the fastest or straightest shooting that wins a fracas. It's doing the thing the other hombre isn't figgering on. Cruse may have a guard or two out against horse thieves or maybe the Utes, but there's one thing you can count on. He thinks you're rolling out for Fort Wallace right now."

Half an hour later O'Banion reined up, the buildings of Rancho Paradise bulking in a black mass before them.

"Dawn's about here," O'Banion said softy. "This is the time they're sleeping the hardest, and the best time to do the job. Anyhow, we've got to wind it up before it gets light. Now there's a 'dobe wall around this place. It's high, but a man can get over it if he's got another man's back to stand on. Give me fifteen minutes and then cut loose with all you've got. Take another five minutes and bust over the wall."

"What are you going to be doing?" McDougal asked.

"I've got to get Judy away from Cruse so he can't work you into a deal. Your job is to pitch so much lead from the front that they won't be watching the back."

O'Banion rode in a wide circle until he reached the opposite side of the wall. He

had seen the place from a distance, but he had never been inside the rambling ranch-house. He knew that it was low and solid, built for defense against the Utes or outlaws. Attack against the kind of men who were inside could only bring failure and death if they were unprepared, and O'Banion was banking on them being unprepared. Men like Cruse habitually underestimated an enemy who made his living with a plow.

Tying his horse to a cedar, O'Banion wormed his way across a piece of boulder-strewn ground. Then, within twenty feet of the wall, he froze. A man had come around the corner, a lighted cigarette drooping from his mouth.

"That you, Benbow?" O'Banion called softly.

The cowboy stopped, back pressed against the wall, and for the moment was lost to O'Banion's vision. Evidently the rider was puzzled, for he toed out his cigarette and kept his place there, holding his silence for a long minute while tension built in O'Banion.

"Is that you, Benbow?" O'Banion called again.

"Hell no! Who are you?"

"Verling. Shot to pieces. Give me a hand."

It was a long chance, but if the cowboy didn't detect the difference in voice, it would work. Possibly he was a new man, or at least one who had not known Brack Verling well. He came forward quickly, swearing in surprise. "Hell's bells, Verling, I thought they'd finished you."

He had reached O'Banion then, and O'Banion who had been lying on the ground, came up hard against him, gun barrel swinging in a vicious arc. The man started a yell that never got past his teeth. O'Banion eased his body to the ground, and lifting the cowboy's gun, slid it into his own waistband and tried to scale the wall. Failing, he went back for his horse, stepped to the saddle, and went over.

O'Banion landed on his feet, and held his place for a moment, knowing that the fifteen minutes were nearly up. There was the faint gleam of light from inside the house. Out here there was no sound of movement nor sign of life, but O'Banion, whose senses had been sharpened by years of this kind of close grappling with death, felt another's presence. He was here within fifty feet of Judy, but could not risk movement.

It came then, like thunder out of a sullen sky, the cracking of rifles that blasted apart the dawn silence, flame ribbons a lurid transient light. There was chaos inside the yard as cursing men tumbled from beds and grabbed guns and ran out of the bunkhouse.

O'Banion couldn't wait. He raced to the house looming directly ahead of him and ran headlong into a hot .45 slug that smashed a rib in his left side and jolted him to a halt. Instinctively he triggered a shot at the Cruse man, and went on. He heard the cry of agony, and stumbled over a body. Tearing the door open, he drove along the hall that bisected the house.

Precious seconds, these. Perhaps not long enough for the job that had to be done. A man was yelling oaths and orders from the front of the house. Somebody was firing from a window. Then other guns took up the refrain.

There was a wall lamp at the far end of the hall, and O'Banion was almost to it when Jess Dollit stepped through a doorway directly into his path. Surprise that was close to paralysis gripped Dollit. He cried out, "O'Banion," and raised his gun. O'Banion shot him, and not waiting to watch him die, kicked his gun the length of the hall and went into the room Dollit had left..

OUTSIDE the din of firing increased. Smoke drifted across the room and gathered in blue pulsating waves around a tall lamp on a table. For a moment O'Banion couldn't distinguish anything. Judy was here in this house. Perhaps in this room. He stood there for an instant, eyes searching the murky corners.

A man yelled, "There's a million of 'em. Coming faster'n I can shoot 'em."

McDougal was bringing his men in. Time was running out. Somewhere Cruse had Judy and he'd be using her for his high trump.

"You'd better call McDougal off." It was Cruse's voice and not far away. "I've got the girl here, O'Banion. If you want to see her alive, you'll stop McDougal."

"You made a mistake when you took her," O'Banion yelled. "Any court in Colorado would hang you for it."

Cruse's laugh was a terrible sound to

hear. "I didn't make a mistake. She's the one person you and McDougal will pull out for. If you don't, it'll be you making the mistake."

O'Banion couldn't stop the colonists now if he wanted to, and Cruse knew that, but he was gambling for his own life. It was the thing O'Banion had feared and tried to prevent, Cruse using Judy McDougal to force this deal.

Searching his mind, O'Banion could find no weapon to stop Cruse. Desperately he called, "I don't know you've got Judy, Cruse. Show yourself."

For a moment O'Banion didn't think it would work, and when Cruse moved into the open from behind a bookcase, O'Banion saw he was no better off now that it had. Cruse held Judy hard against him, one hand across her mouth, the other arm around her waist, the hand clutching his gun.

Judy's head hid most of Cruse's fierce pirate face. In the uncertain light the part of Cruse bulging around the girl's figure made too small a target to risk a shot on.

"You're seeing the girl now, O'Banion," Cruse said coldly. "You can call it, the girl's life for mine."

"You'll be dead," O'Banion said through dry lips.

"But you won't have the girl."

What happened then was for the moment beyond understanding. Cruse let out a yell that echoed sheer agony. He jerked his hand away from Judy's mouth, and his grip around her waist must have loosened because in that same instant she plunged sideways away from him, and Kirk Cruse stood with not shield before him, big and wide, a target O'Banion couldn't miss. He fired twice, the roar of those shots beating against his brain, the gun butt kicking against his palm.

Cruse went back on his heels with the first slug, his own gun driving a wild bullet over O'Banion's head. The second brought the Colt tumbling out of his hand.

"You're a good man, O'Banion. Took a good man to get those rabbits to fight. Didn't think you could do it." Cruse put a hand against the bookcase, trying to hold his body upright, trying to keep his grip on life. "We'd have gone a long ways together."

It fled then, this life that Kirk Cruse had abused. He broke all at once, at neck and waist and knee, and became a sprawled shapeless mass of bone and flesh.

O'Banion held Judy in his arms for a moment while reaction from this terror swept through her. When she had quit shaking, he asked, "What made him let go of you?"

"I just opened my mouth. He was squeezing so hard a finger slid between my teeth, so I bit him."

It was hours later than O'Banion sat his saddle beside the ford of the Silver and watched the huge ungainly wagons dip and rise and sway as they were pulled across the river. This was the end. In a matter of minutes McDougal's lead wagon would reach the townsite. The gold had been found in Cruse's safe. O'Banion would claim his pay from that gold, and be gone. It was better that way. Even if Judy did love him, she belonged here in civilization while he belonged out there somewhere behind yonder peaks where the sun painted the sky a red as bright as his hair.

"It's a pretty sight, isn't it?"

Judy had ridden up beside him. He looked squarely at her, and for the first time he was sure of the color of her eyes. They were blue. There was no doubt about it. He wondered if he had ever really seen her before.

"Yeah, it is a right purty sight," he agreed. "Hope everything works out all right for you folks."

"You've got to stay with us, Sunset, to make things work out right," she said simply. "We'll always need you. I lived a lifetime last night. I know now that you have to have new standards to measure things in a new country. Colorado will never be Ohio." She held out her left hand. "I gave Sim's ring back last night after your fight with Dollit. I was beginning to understand then."

That was it—new standards in a new country. These pilgrims would all have to learn that. He asked her suddenly, "You think they'll have any need for a drifter like me after they get settled?"

"Well," she said a little defiantly, "I'll need you."

He grinned at her then. "If that's the case, I reckon I'd better stay."

THE END

Beartooth Bounty

"Take it easy, trapper. Don't get ideas!"

By VIVIAN N. WHITE

LEW CAMERON knelt at the edge of Bear Lake and pulled at a short length of chain reaching into the water. It came up heavily, bringing to view the wet, brown fur and bare, round tail of a muskrat. The animal had drowned in its struggles against the trap, clamped firmly upon a leg.

"Too bad, little feller," Lew half apologized, "but every one of you babies puts another dollar in the pocket. Good sized, too. Got a mate?"

He fell to replacing the trap as he spoke, ripping away coarse grass to substitute for the packing the rodent had torn from the mouth of its den during the fight against steel. Reaching for a fresh handful, his eye traced a pattern ten feet before him, coming suddenly to rest upon a pair of boots. The boots began to move forward slowly!

The man who wore the boots was a stranger to Lew, tall and thin, more thin, Lew thought, than he should have been. The eyes were deep set and dark above a long nose, about which grew a thick, black beard that obscured the rest of his face. Stained and broken teeth centered in a hideous grin.

Lew noticed all this in the first fleeting glimpse, and then he forgot the man's face in the tenseness with which the gun was held. Its muzzle stared directly upon Lew in a way that made him rise and back a step toward the lake. The man's voice made him halt suddenly, however.

"Don't run," the man advised in a cool manner. "They all want to run when Ol' Gus comes in sight, but it don't do 'em no good."

"Ol' Gus?" Lew queried. He had been trapping the Bear Lake region all fall and had had no visitors in five weeks. Today he

The madman's gun prodded Lew on toward his cabin, and every step he took, he knew, was a yard closer to death . . .

had followed his muskrat line around the east end of the lake, and now stood at a point directly across from his cabin, hidden in the fir growth along the north side. He had not known anyone called "Ol' Gus."

"You mean you ain't heard of me?" Gus asked, offended. He had stopped, and he stood there, slightly weaving, overweighted with weariness. Only the gun remained steady. "All the banks, road jobs, rewards, an' you ain't heard of Ol' Gus?"

He laughed, a dry, mirthless laugh that froze suddenly as he continued, "They're after me, you hear? Day an' night, State after State, I trailed north. I'd shake 'em for a while, maybe, but not for long. They'd get close again. They're close now."

"Who?" Lew asked absently, surmising.

"Who you suppose?" Gus grumbled. "The law, of course. Two months they've hounded me. This mornin' they got my horse. You got a horse? Sure, you'd have to have a horse."

Lew shook his head. "Not me. I trail out on foot, what time I go, or hire a man to pack in for me."

Gus' eyes narrowed to black beads. "You're lyin'," he accused. "You'd hafta keep a horse. You couldn't get the furs out. You'd have a cabin, too. That's where we're goin', to your cabin. When the law-dogs get there, you ain't seen me. You'll send 'em on."

"You'd be a fool to stay here," Lew calculated. "Snow in the air, maybe a week, maybe two. You'd be a dead cinch in the snow." As he spoke, Lew reached down and picked up the fallen cut of grass, placing it over the muskrat entrance, careful to leave a breather opening.

"Come on!" Gus snapped tersely. "We ain't got time to play. They're close; too close."

"Dogs?" Lew asked, stooping to retrieve the rat. His eyes rested upon the rifle he had leaned against a log while making the set.

Gus read his mind, picked up the rifle, and after searching Lew for a possible revolver and finding none, considered the hunting knife, let it stay, and replied, "No dogs. But you'd think they had the noses for it, the way they track. Let's go."

Lew caught the nod for him to lead, and advanced toward the east end of the lake. "I left rats along the way," he said. "Always pick them up on the way back home."

"Leave 'em," Gus warned. "Too open 'long the lake. Stay back in the timber an' don't try nothin'!"

Aong the south side the bowl sloped upward at but a gradual slant for a mile before reaching stiffly skyward. It was a strong contrast to the rugged north rim, broken spires rearing themselves in places almost abruptly from the edge of the water.

Lew considered the region, from the indented cove and level bench upon which he had built his cabin, back and up to the tangled maze of broken country, many of the higher tips of which were already snow capped.

"You're a fool to fight north," Lew insisted. "Look at that country. Sure, a man could bury himself up there, and a posse could maybe walk within six feet of him without even guessin', but you got to eat. That's when they'd get you. Can't live on cold jerky all winter; can't stay still. They'd hear you if you shot fresh meat; they'd strike trail if you moved. You can't beat them in the Beartooth, Gus."

LEW didn't look back, but he knew that Gus followed only a few feet behind him. They had circled south into the deeper timber, working east. Dense fir reared heavily about them, narrowing visibility in places to a few feet. They struck a light game trail, which Lew followed.

"Who said I'd be up there?" Gus countered. "I've figgered it good. I hide around yore cabin till after they show. You send 'em north, up there. They'll wander for days 'fore they give me up. In the meantime I take yore horse an' move south, fast. It'll be the coldest trail they've had." He chuckled softly, reflecting.

"I told you, Gus," Lew reminded, "I ain't got a horse. When the snow comes, I move the furs by sled. Or maybe I get the man bringin' in supplies to pack them out."

There was the touch of a threat in Gus' tone as he answered, "You better have a horse, or know someone that does!"

"Get one from the law," Lew suggested. "They're mounted, aren't they?"

"An' let 'em know I was here? Humph!" Gus snorted. "What kind of fool you take me for?"

Lew Cameron realized he had talked too much. He had provoked Gus, and the man

was crazed enough from long trailing and cold, bolted, irregular meals to be dangerously unpredictable. What would be his reaction when he found Lew had told the truth about not having a mount? Where would he hide when the lawmen swarmed around Lew's cabin asking questions? There was no loft to the cabin. There was no protection near in which a man might hide. And he couldn't stay in the cabin, for it would be routine courtesy of the wilderness to have a man light and rest long enough for a cup of coffee, or maybe a venison steak.

All these things ranged through Lew's mind as he followed the game trail east. He knew the law would soon arrive. He knew he would of necessity invite them in. Only he didn't know where Ol' Gus would be, other than that Gus would certainly be near enough to watch, near enough to put a bullet through Lew's back if he made the least wrong move.

It would bring about the location Gus held, of course, and the law would win, but likely not before one or two, as well as Lew, had caught slugs. And Lew Cameron, for one, wished to go on living in the Beartooth.

It came back upon him how many times he had walked the edge of the lake, a tranquil blue sky playing upon the darker water, occasionally the cry of a wolf echoing down from the hills, the numerous songs of fowl, and in the fall, as now, the defiant, fearless challenge of an elk boasting defense of his herd. Those sounds were a part of the Beartooth, but the footsteps of a man meant something else. They meant the presence of danger, and today, walking silently along this trail, the same trail Lew walked often, danger, and possibly near death or death itself, followed upon his footsteps.

Day before yesterday, along this trail, there had been nothing to fear. He had gone from set to set, filled with hope and anxiety. The next might bring forth the thrilling sight of a wolf, bristled and snarling, his white fangs dripping foam and blood. That was sport to Lew. Or larger game, it might echo the heavy rumble of a grizzly. The wolf sets were large enough for bear, providing he gave them a drag. But Lew had never preferred a drag in the fall, not till the snow came.

Suddenly, Lew stumbled upon a thought. The eagerness of it caused him to quicken his step in a way that promoted Gus to warn, "Take it easy, trapper. Don't get ideas."

Lew fell back casually. "We're on the east end, barely half way there. I wouldn't want them to catch up."

"They won't, Gus replied confidently. "They're afraid of me, I tell you. Afraid I'll lay low an' let 'em pass. So they go slow, careful. That's how I kept out of the way since they got my horse. I keep walkin', steady."

Lew heard little of what was said. There were wolf traps along this trail, back in the brush. He knew where they were because he had set them. Gus would have no way of knowing until it was too late. They were strong enough that Lew required clamps in order to set them; they would more than hold a man.

The trapper swung slightly from the trail, deeper into the timber. Fifty feet before them were two trees and between those trees mighty jaws of steel lay secretly hidden.

"What's the idea?" Gus snapped, instantly alert.

"Bend in the trail," Lew replied. "Breaks into a clearing. Poor place to be if some of the law had circled ahead, were sittin' up on one of them crags with a glass."

"You're smart," Gus complimented, and fell silent.

The two trees were but a few steps away. Lew Cameron veered some, passing to the left of both trees, missing the trap several feet, and his blood went cold with the thought that just that moment had come to him.

Ol' Gus had a rifle and revolver. It would have been Lew Cameron's suicide to have led Gus into those steel jaws. Lew contemplated the chance of whirling back upon his foe. The surprise and pain would have given him a lead. But even as he considered it, he knew it would never work. Nor was there a tree behind which to leap.

He knew that he must somehow force Gus to release those weapons, but how? It might be done in a fall, but what reason would a man have to fall?

They came again into the trail. Gus walked behind, seldom varying from the

eight to ten foot lap he held. He seemed content to move in silence, resting as it were from the strain of searching for his own outlet from each tangle.

Lew fought every problem, weighed each possibility, always shook his head and came back to the traps. They were good enough to outwit the wolf and the bear, why not a man?

Bear, that was it! How did he outwit the bear before the snows? This time Lew did not increase his speed, but presently left the trail again, climbing slightly to a low bench studded with fir. The branches hung low and heavy, raking against them.

"You're smart," Gus said again.

"Yeah," Lew agreed. "It comes to a man when he lives in the wilderness. Crafty, like an animal." He smiled deep into his collar in a way that Gus could not see.

Lowering his head, Lew fought through underbrush, twisting and turning, watching Gus from the corner of his eye. Often the man followed. Occasionally, if the going directly ahead looked easier and shorter, he cut across. That was exactly as Lew wished. He fought his way into the next thicket, away from any trail. Though ahead the scrub fir reached barely to the armpits, he shifted gradually to the left, then gradually right. From his bent position he searched back under his arm, following the movements Gus proposed to make. The cut through was tempting. The duff lay soft and undisturbed. A pounding heart rushed up in Lew's throat, choking him with the hope he dared not speak.

Ol' Gus came up a step, another, and then his heavy boot sank quickly in the duff, throwing him violently. Lew's rifle was flung heavily forward as the thin body struck the earth and vanished.

A loud oath rent the air. Lew flattened himself instinctively against the needles as he saw his rifle hit the edge of the pit into which Gus had fallen, and slide from sight to land with a thud at the bottom. Two small firs, decoys placed there with the covering of light twigs and duff, had rolled in on top of Gus, leaving at the surface a ragged break five feet long by little more than half as wide.

"Gus," Lew called softly, remaining down. "You all right?"

His answer came in a series of blazing oaths that eventually fell to a mumble. "Get me out of here!" Gus bellowed after a moment.

"The law should be here soon, Gus," Lew said, ignoring his plea. "Won't they be surprised when they find out what stumbled in my pit! Like the honey, Gus? I spread it on those little firs to draw old bruin. It's a bit light to live on for long, though."

"Shut up!"

"Better throw out the guns, Gus," Lew suggested.

"Come an' get 'em!" Gus growled.

"I don't have to," Lew reminded. "All I have to do is wait for you to starve."

He heard a twig snap toward the lake. Cupping his hands to his mouth, he called out, "Hey, down there! It's Lew Cameron, trapper! Come up!"

At intervals he repeated. Presently quiet movement in the thickets told him the lawmen were taking no chances.

He called again and the green boughs parted to disclose a tall, bearded figure in range clothes. Other men followed him, all heavily armed. Lew waved the rat.

"Bearpit over there," he said.

"Heard you call," the tall man spoke, stepping forward. "I'm United States Deputy Marshal Howard. We're looking for a man—."

"Seen him," Lew interrupted. "Right now he's layin' at the bottom of that pit." He related everything from the time they left the lake, and finished, "He said something about a reward, Marshal."

The Marshal nodded agreement. "We're here, Gus," he called. "Throw out those guns. You'll have to sooner or later, you know."

There followed a silence in which the men stood waiting. Presently the revolver came out of the pit, followed by the rifle. Up came knives, a cartridge belt, and extra ammunition.

"There comes the armament of a two thousand dollar trophy, Cameron," the Marshal announced.

Lew grinned. "Ain't been a bounty on game for years," he said, "but—."

The Marshal finished the thought in Lew's mind as he interrupted cheerfully, "But you got one now, haven't you."

By JOHN C. ROPKE

He gave Pop a brutal shove that slammed him back against the stall.

With his trigger-hand withered and useless, what could Pop Hannigan do when the local gun-king swaggered into his forge to keep a fatal appointment with Pop's lawman son—who had yet to be tested by the ordeal of fire, steel and hot lead?

PAYMENT DEFERRED

POP HANNIGAN stood at the door of his blacksmith shop, his mild blue eyes squinting down the dusty road that led into town. Far down the road a young boy herded a single cow toward a distant pasture. But Pop looked beyond the boy, searching for the lone rider he knew would come.

Young George Hannigan, his chair tilted against the side of the shop just inside the door, shifted a straw to the corner of his mouth.

"Looking for someone special, Dad?"

Pop kept looking up the road. "Nope,"

he said flatly, "just lookin'." He drew the arm of his long sleeved undershirt across his bearded, sweaty face, and turned back into the shop.

His burn-scarred leather apron, shirting down from his pot belly, flapped against his knees as he strode to the live forge. He shifted a cherry-red horseshoe around in the hot coals with the tongs, and worked the bellows in silence.

George Hannigan chuckled. "You never were a good liar, Dad. You've been to the door ten times in the last half hour. My guess is that you're looking for Hank Wilson. Right?"

Pop paused and turned slowly, his gnarled hand still holding the wooden arm of the bellows. He studied his son, seeing the young reckless grin, the short stocky body so similar to his own. And Pop realized suddenly that his son was hoping Hank *would* come to town.

"What's that you say about Hank Wilson?" he asked casually. "You think Hank will come to town?"

George took the straw from his mouth and laughed. "Hell, Dad," he said in that careless way of his, "you know damned well he will. Hank ain't the kind to let a thing like this go without a ruckus. He probably knows by now that I've slapped that trouble-making son of his in jail. He'll. . . ."

"What you aim to do about it case he does come?" Pop interrupted. "Hank's a pretty fair man with a gun."

George pushed his tilted chair away from the wall and strode to the open door of the shop. For long minutes he stared out at the town. Then he looked back into the shop.

"There's only one thing I *can* do, Dad. Reckon I'll have to kill Hank, if that's the way he wants it. He and that whelp of his have run this town long enough. People are sick of their trouble making. The town is growing up. Folks want law and order. That's why they elected me sheriff. It's my job to stop Hank, Dad."

For just a second Pop saw his wife in his son's face. It was the same reckless look, the same eager, nervous excitement in his son's eyes as there used to be in his wife's when there was a hint of danger.

She had looked exactly like that the day she rode Black Devil, the killer horse, at the rodeo. George had only been knee high to a grasshopper then, and Pop had begged her not to enter the contest. But the thrill of danger had been too great.

Pop had never been able to understand that feeling fully. He had been born in the East, his wife in the West. And he had hated the West and its rough ways ever since the day they had carried his wife's lifeless body from the arena.

And now, Pop knew, this same West that he hated would take his son. George was no match for Hank, and he was sure that his son knew it. Yet he knew George would meet Hank eagerly, even seek him out to force the issue.

Pop went to the door and stood beside his son in the bright sunlight. "You dead sure, son," he asked slowly, "you sure Hank's whelp was the one who burned the nester out?"

"Positive. He admitted it, even bragged about it. His old man has everyone so damn scared of that gun of his that his son figured I'd be afraid to lock him up."

Pop frowned. "After all," he said casually, "it was just a no account nester."

George smiled. "That has nothing to do with it, Dad. You know that. It's the way folks feel about it. Nobody liked the nester, but he's just as entitled to protection as any one of us."

Pop studied the town, its usual activity lessened by the sultry Arizona morning. A few women were on the boarded walks, their shopping bags swinging at their sides. A little, thin-legged girl with pigtails sat on the hard seat of a buckboard before the drug store. And directly across the street from the shop, on the veranda of the Last Chance Saloon, three loungers waited for ambition to stir them into a pinochle game.

The town's growing up, Pop thought—getting bigger every day. Even the cemetery, on the hill behind town, was growing. There was a time when only his wife rested there, but now there were many tombstones. Maybe George was right, the town did need law and order.

He put his calloused hand on his son's muscular young shoulder. "I ain't askin' you to dodge Hank Wilson, son. But don't go pushing trouble. Maybe when Hank hears why you put his boy in the hoosegow he'll think ya did right."

George looked steadily at his father.

"You should know better than that, Dad."

Pop shook his head. "I don't know nothin'. I'm just asking ya not to start the trouble, if there's gonna be any. Now do me a favor and ride out to Ben Jones' ranch for lunch. Give Hank time to think it over for a while after he hits town. When you come back, if he still wants trouble, then by God give him a belly full!"

George chewed on his lower lip. Finally he shrugged and his eyes smiled at his father. "All right, Dad, if that's the way you want it. But it won't do any good. A man like Hank Wilson don't change over night."

POP went back to his forge. In a few seconds his five pound hammer was rising and falling with the casual ease of long years of practice. The shop vibrated to the clanging chords of the anvil.

Pop hammered the shoe into the desired shape automatically, his mind on other things. He halted the rhythm of his swing and held the shoe up for inspection, his arms cording with muscles as he gripped the tongs. He nodded absently, and strode to the water bucket beside the door.

There was a sharp hiss of protest, a bubbling gurgle, and steam rose from the bucket in dense clouds and mushroomed against the low roof.

Pop squatted beside the bucket, waiting for the shoe to cool. He looked up the main street and saw George leaving the north end of town toward Ben Jones' place. Then Pop looked down the south road, and he knew that the rider in the distance, coming toward town at a slow walk, was Hank Wilson.

Pop's face was expressionless as he reached into the bucket for the shoe. There was a sorrel in the double stall and Pop went over to her. He lifted her fore leg between his knees and began to work with hammer and file.

He was just finishing the shoe when a rider dismounted at the door. He was a big man, with a barrel-like body and thick bowed legs. He slapped his chestnut into the shop and followed it in.

Pop stood up slowly, his hand bracing his back. "Howdy, Hank."

Hank pushed his black, weatherstained sombrero back on his head with a thick forefinger. He nodded curtly, silently.

Pop shot a quick glance over the chestnut. It had not been ridden hard, but then Pop hadn't expected it would be. Hank wasn't the kind who hurried things. He was slow, sure, confident of himself.

Even the chestnut's saddle reminded Pop of the man who owned it. It was a heavy, double stitched affair, as strong and sturdy as Hank himself. It was sweat stained, weatherbeaten, the leather covering of the iron horn burned off by a hundred cutting ropes.

"Belly band needs fixin'," Hank said suddenly. "Check the cinch too. Kinda worn."

Pop nodded and waited for the man to continue. He knew why Hank had come to the shop. He had probably seen George riding out of town and expected there would be some sort of message. But in the event there wasn't, Hank wanted his horse out of sight, so when George came back he wouldn't know Hank Wilson was in town.

Pop said nothing. He removed the saddle and led the chestnut into the stall beside the mare. Only the steady grind of the oats from the mare's moving jaws disturbed the silence of the shop.

Hank lifted the hammer from the anvil and balanced it easily in his big hand. "Gotta pay the sheriff a little call," he said without looking at Pop. "Guess he's at his office, huh?"

Pop was examing the saddle. He looked up slowly and stared out the door. "No," he said flatly, "he ain't in town."

Hank put the hammer down carefully and stared at the forge. "Reckon I'll wait for him," he said evenly. "That is if you're sure he's coming back."

Pop cursed under his breath. He looked down at his right hand, gnarled and twisted from the time he had picked up a hot shoe. That hand had been almost useless since. It was good enough for swinging a hammer maybe, or for shoeing. But as a gun hand it was useless.

And right now, more than ever, Pop regretted the accident. Hank's reference to George's possible running out brought a quick, unusual flash of anger to Pop's face.

"He'll be back, Hank," Pop said finally.

The big man studied Pop, his powerful left hand, the gun hand so dreaded, flexing impatiently. And he caught something of

Pop Hannigan's bitter, suppressed hatred.

He smiled suddenly, a partial opening of wire thin lips that exposed dirty, yellow teeth under a black mustache.

"That son of yours," he said softly, "is gettin' a mite big for his pants. He shouldn't have put my boy in jail just because the kid was havin' a little sport. He ought to turn that star in afore he gets hurt."

Pop stood up suddenly, the saddle falling from his knees and landing on the dusty shop floor. He shook with anger and stepped toward Hank, his finger under the man's nose.

"Damn you!" he snapped. "I'm sick and tired of you and your damn arrogance." He snorted. "Turn his star in afore he gets hurt! Bah! There ain't a man in Arizona big enough to make him do that. Leastways, not any big mouthed bag of wind like yourself."

Hank's left hand doubled and swung back, then he changed his mind and gave Pop a brutal shove that slammed him back against the side of the stall. He left the shop then, kicking the bucket of water over on his way out. His holster, low on his left side, slapped against his thigh. He walked with an awkward rolling motion, dust clouding up under his boots as he walked across the street to the Last Chance Saloon.

POP pushed himself erect slowly, his back aching from the fall. His anger was gone now, and in its place was a sick sense of shame and disgust with himself.

He had sent George out of town hoping Hank's anger would abate while he waited for the sheriff's return. Pop had even thought of going to Hank while he waited, and maybe talking the man into changing his mind. Now, more than ever, Hank would be gunning for the man who put his son behind bars.

By noon, Pop sensed the tense attitude of the town. Hank had probably boasted of what he'd do when the young sheriff got back to town, and those who had finished their business in the shops kept hanging around, waiting. Even women, dawdling over their purchases, kept a sharp eye on the north road. Kids ran back and forth across the main street, excitement pushing them into motion.

Pop finished the repairs on Hank's saddle and hung it on a peg beside the forge. For a second he was tempted to throw the damn thing into the coals, watching it burn until only the iron horn remained. But he realized the childishness of such an act. And still, he studied the forge a long time, undecided.

And while he stood there, he was cursing the West. Cursing the town, and the people in it who were so eager to see his son go down under the booming gun of Hank Wilson. Everyone couldn't help knowing that George didn't have a chance, but they knew he'd accept the challenge. They knew he'd lose, but not a one of them would do a thing to help.

At two in the afternoon Pop knew his son was coming. He had been sitting in the shade of his shop, watching the two men who sat on the porch of the Last Chance Saloon. Now, as he watched, they both rose, like puppets pulled by the same string, and they hurried through the batwing doors.

Pop's hands started to shake, and he licked suddenly dry lips. He hurried over to the forge for Hank's saddle, and in a few minutes he had the chestnut ready to ride. Very slowly then, he led the horse from the shop. And in the crook of his left arm he carried an old blunderbus shotgun.

He felt the eyes of the entire town swing in his direction, but he didn't care. He knew they would figure why he was doing this. It was his way of letting his son know Hank was in the saloon. George wouldn't miss seeing the big chestnut.

Hank was on the saloon porch now, staring up the street, his face and shoulders in shadow, the afternoon sun bathing the rest of his body. Then he sensed Pop and looked in his direction, frowning as he saw the shotgun.

Hank's hand lowered to the polished handle of his gun, and Pop halted. He stood for long seconds looking at Hank, then he let the horse stand in the road while he turned back.

He rested the shotgun beside the open door, and then deliberately went back to the chestnut and continued toward the saloon. He dropped the reins over the hitching rack of the saloon and smiled up at Hank. Then he turned and walked back to his shop.

Still some distance out of town, he made

out the big black stallion that was George's mount. Then he faced Hank, leaning against the shop door beside the shotgun.

Hank studied him carefully and Pop could guess what was going on in his mind.

Minutes ticked away, precious time, as George neared town, then Pop saw the confident smile flash across Hank's face and he knew relief. He had wondered if the man would make the obvious move.

Hank was going to ride out and meet George at the far end of town. He wouldn't have to worry about the shotgun then. He'd take care of Pop later.

Hank lumbered down the veranda steps and moved toward his chestnut. His movements were sure, confident.

Hank's eyes were watching the other end of town as he swung into the saddle. The motion was smooth, quick, surprisingly so for so big a man. His left foot found the stirrup by instinct, his hand grasped the saddle horn, and he was mounted.

But once in the saddle, he swayed. He seemed to have trouble sitting erect, yet he made no effort to grasp the horn for support. His face went dead white under his dark tan, and he swung pain-filled eyes toward Pop.

Hank got control of himself then, and went rock steady in the saddle. His left hand opened like the claws of an eagle, ready to grasp its prey, then he dropped the hand limply to his side, and cursed under his breath.

All expression suddenly left Hank's face and Pop knew what was coming. Unconsciously Pop leaned slightly forward, bracing himself for the slug he knew would come. And even as Hank's right hand started to move across his stomach for the holster on his left thigh, Pop caught motion out of the corner of his eye.

George stopped his trotting black in front of Hank's chestnut, and Pop knew a flash of pride as he realized his son was not afraid.

"You looking for me, Hank?"

Hank had dropped his reins across the chestnut's neck. Now he picked them up slowly in his right hand.

"I reckon I've changed my mind, Sheriff," he said slowly. "But I'll be lookin' you up—some other time."

Without another word he reined his mount out into the center of the street and headed out of town.

But Pop knew that Hank's 'some other time' would never come. He looked down at his own hand, gnarled and twisted from the time he had picked up the hot shoe. That shoe hadn't looked hot, but it was.

If Hank hadn't been so intent on watching George's approach, he might have noticed the burnt leather at the base of his saddle horn. The leather Pop had singed when he had heated the horn in the forge.

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A badly frightened passenger drove the spooked horses.

Surging Stageline Drama

CHAPTER ONE

Wrangler for Rogues' Station

THE streets of the camp were quagmires that night, but the rain which had started as a cloudburst was now only a steady drizzle. But wet or dry, Virginia City came to life after dark, and the plank walks—where such existed—were thronged with men from the diggings. Many of them along C Street were splattered with muck from the stagecoach that came lurching into town from the desert.

The shotgun guard was missing, and the regular jehu was dead in the boot. A frock-coated and badly frightened passenger had driven the six spooked horses in from the sage flats and up the steep grades—and now he was having trouble getting them halted. A bold fellow in a miner's red shirt grabbed at the lines of the right side leader. Two other men plunged into the mud to

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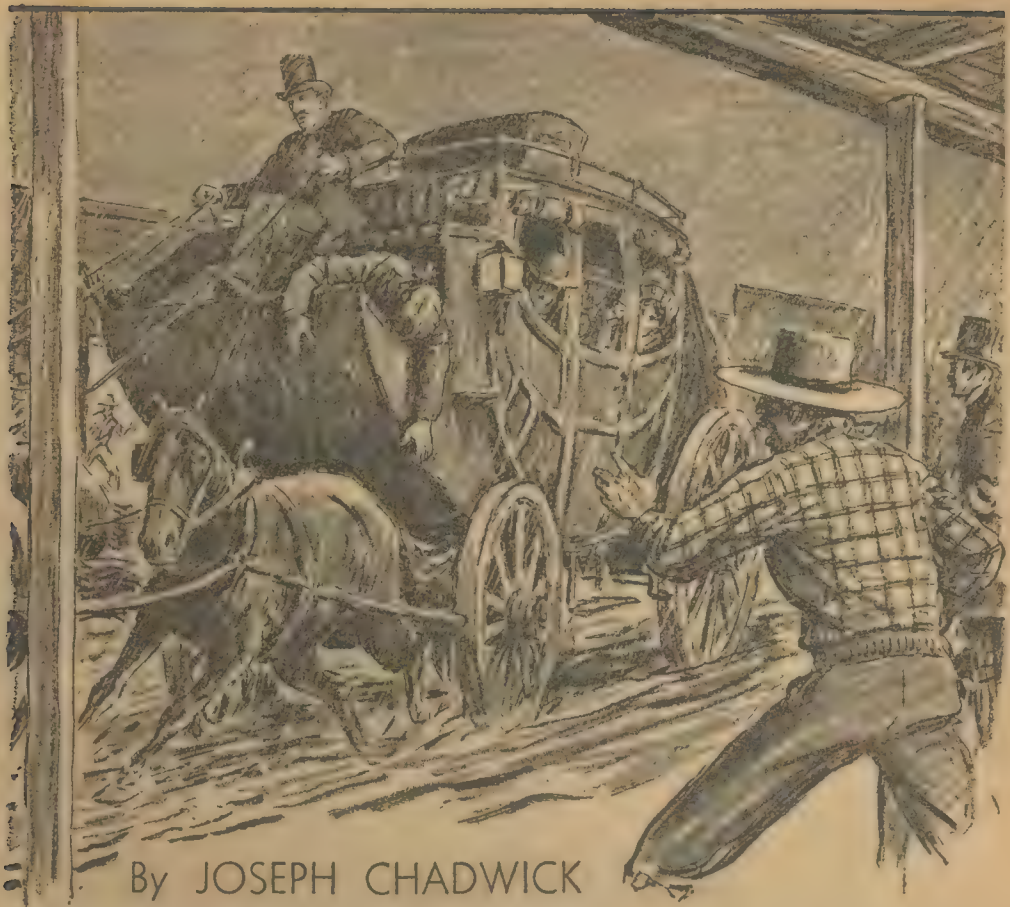


By JOSEPH CHADWICK

What strange fate brought Lieutenant Jeff Mundy from the bloody field of Bull Run to a lowly hostler's job in that God-forsaken stage station, where westbound Concords paused briefly in their terror-stricken flight from the menace that lurked in the desert called Hell's Back Yard?

help wrestle the horses to a halt. Men came running from every direction, and C Street, around the halted stage, filled up from side to side.

"What happened?"

The query came from men morbidly glad that something had happened. Any relief from boredom was welcomed. The curious crowd pressed forward in a hard tight pack, and the shaken-up passengers had difficulty getting from the coach. The frock-coated man on the box began explaining, talking pompously in the way of a little man finding himself suddenly important.

"Road agents! They caught us twelve miles out on the desert—and opened fire without warning!" He mopped at his face with a handkerchief. "The shotgun messenger never had a chance," he went on. "Shot right off the box. Ed Hanks, the driver, couldn't stop quick enough to suit the ornery sons, so they shot him. They got the strong box, despite all I could do. After they rode off, I turned the rig and

ROGUES' STATION ★

came back here as quickly as I could!"

The four passengers from within the coach added their versions of the holdup to what the man on the box was saying. All five were talking in chorus. The crowd ate it up, drank it in—with relish. Only one man did not seem to enjoy the excitement.

Jeff Mundy stood at the edge of the throng, on the plank walk before an eating-place. He was a tall lean man of less than thirty, and, by his dress, he was neither miner or boomtown denizen. Booted and spurred, wearing a broad plainsman's hat, he was obviously a stranger to Virginia City. The arrival of the stagecoach had brought anger to his eyes. But now he shrugged, as though thinking, *Nothing I can do about it.* His attention went back to the restaurant's grimy window, and he took a silver dollar from his pocket. "Heads, I eat."

He flipped the cartwheel, and it was tails. Jeff grinned wryly, pocketed the dollar, took up his belt another hole, and put his back to the inviting window. A holstered Colt hung at his thigh from a cartridge studded belt. He lifted a hand and rubbed his squared chin, eyeing individuals in the crowd with intent speculation.

His eyes narrowed down on picking out a pudgy well-dressed man—one of the stage passengers. The pudgy man was done talking. Pushing through the crowd, he started along the street. He carried a valise in one hand, a gold-knobbed cane in the other. He moved fast on bandy legs, but not so fast as Jeff Mundy.

Jeff turned into the same dark alleyway, which was a short-cut to B Street. Deep in the alley, Jeff drew his pistol. Coming up behind the pudgy man, he said flatly, "Don't turn around, friend. . . . This is another holdup!"

The pudgy man did turn. He whirled around, dropping his bag, and his cane struck out and cracked down on Jeff Mundy's wrist. Pain loosened Jeff's grip on the gun, and it fell to the mud. A twist and a jerk at the cane's gold knob, brought a dull-glinting blade from the stick. It was only half as long as a saber, but its wicked point leapt to Jeff's throat. The pudgy man chuckled mirthlessly.

"Now, my good fellow—"

"Give me another chance, mister. I was hungry and just wanted a meal!"

"A likely story—in a town this rich!"

"I just got in, from Texas. I swear—"

"Texas, eh? A damn' Johnny Reb, I'll wager!"

Jeff Mundy stiffened. "You can slit my throat, but I won't deny that. I'm a Secessionist."

The pudgy man puffed out his cheeks and spread his thick lips, and looked almost froglike. "Proud, eh? Like all the Secesh," he growled. "What are you doing in Nevada? You're big and young enough to be wearing a Reb uniform."

"I stopped a Yank bullet at Bull Run," Jeff growled. "A loco surgeon wanted to cut off my leg. I swore I'd shoot him, if he tried. The Army had no more use for me, shipped me home to die. My leg began to heal. Heard a man could get work here at the mines, so I drifted."

Having said so much, he held his breath. It was quite likely that he wouldn't be believed, and a little pressure would drive the point of that cane-sword through his throat. Jeff began to sweat. He had taken the worst sort of risk, and, though so far it had worked out as he had planned, the risk might turn wholly against him. His life dangled on the needle-point of the pudgy man's blade. An ugly way to die, skewered on cold steel. . . . The point dropped from Jeff's throat. The man who controlled it had completed his thinking.

"I take it that this is your—er, first misstep?"

"I'm an honest man, except when I'm hungry," Jeff said, putting a whine into his voice. "If I can get a job. . . ."

"You look like an honest sort," the pudgy man said. "And I'm not a man to hold a grudge. You would have gotten little by robbing me, my Texas friend. Pick up your gun."

Jeff gaped. "You mean it—"

The thick lips formed a smile. The blade slid back into its sheath, becoming an innocent looking cane again. Jeff stooped and picked up his six-shooter, and holstered it. The pudgy man tapped his valise with the cane. "Bring that along, friend," he said.

THEY went along the dark alleyway, Jeff a step or two behind with the valise. He thought elatedly, *It was easy*

This Len Ballou can be fooled! They came out on B Street, turned along a plank walk until they came to a frame building housing a hardware store. There was an open flight of steps at the side, and the pudgy man mounted. Jeff followed and saw that a door above bore a sign that read: Len Ballou, Attorney-at-Law. Ballou unlocked the door, muttered, "One minute." He went inside and lighted an oil lamp, then motioned Jeff in.

The room was a small office equipped with a desk and a couple of chairs, a case filled with law books, a table upon which the lamp stood, and a small pot-bellied stove. A curtained doorway led to a back room which evidently was Ballou's living quarters. The lawyer took out and lighted a cheroot. He was ruddy-faced, a man of about fifty.

Jeff put down the valise, seated himself on the chair to which Ballou pointed. Ballou took the chair behind the desk. He puffed on his cheroot, folded his hand across his paunch, and watched Jeff with pale blue eyes.

"I was on my way to Salt Lake City," Ballous stated finally. "Had business there. That hold-up was mighty inconvenient for me. But now that I'm back. . . ." He shrugged. "You ever head of me, friend?"

"No, sir," Jeff said respectfully. "But I read your sign. My name's Mundy, Mr. Ballou—Lieutenant Jeff Mundy."

"And you need a job," Ballou said. "I guess, being a Johnny Reb, you'd rather work for a Southerner than for a Yankee. Right?"

"Just so I earn enough to eat, sir."

"You ever heard of Rogues' Station?"

"Can't say that I have. I'm new in these parts."

"It's a stage station out on the desert," Ballou explained. "A lonely place. But there's a job open at Rogues' Station, for a man like you. I figure you'd make a good wrangler."

"I sure know horses, Mr. Ballou."

"Good," said the lawyer, and turned to his desk. He took up paper and pen and wrote quickly. His letter finished, he sealed it in an envelope. He handed the letter to Jeff. "Listen closely now. You take tomorrow's eastbound stage to Rogues' Station. Since you'll be working for the Overland, you won't need to pay a fare. I'll see the Overland agent and fix things up for you. You'll find George Foulard, the agent, at Rogues' Station. Give him that letter, and he'll put you to work."

Ballou paused, lost in thought for a moment. Then: "If you're the right man, Foulard will take care of you. He's a Johnny Reb, too. And a good man. But I advise you, Mundy, not to talk too much about being a Southern sympathiser. You understand?"

"I guess such talk would lead to trouble."

"That's right," Ballou said. "Now, I'm not going to forget you. Foulard will write me about how you handle that wrangling job. And I'll be passing by there, on my way to Salt Lake in a few days or a week. If you're the man I think, I'll help you go far, Mundy."

Jeff stood up and tucked the letter into his pocket. He thanked the lawyer, then turned to the door. Ballou said, "One minute. . . ." He took two silver dollars from his pocket and handed them over. "That'll buy you a meal tonight and breakfast in the morning. Luck to you, my friend."

Jeff said, "Thanks. I'm sure obliged to you," then he went out. Once on the street, he headed for that restaurant on C Street. He was hungrier than ever. He was hungry now in the way of a man who had accomplished a good day's work. He had outwitted one of the shrewdest men in Old Washoe.

THE stagecoach had been moved from C Street, and the crowd had scattered. There was still talk of the hold-up, however, among the men in the restaurant. Jeff sat up at the counter and gave his order, then listened to the talk. It was almost an argument. A bewhiskered miner claimed that a band of Confederate sympathizers was looting the eastbound treasure-laden stages. "I'd bet a month's pay," he proclaimed, "that the stolen specie ends up in Jeff Davis' Treasury. The Rebs know Lincoln needs Nevada gold and silver to finance the war. Old Abe himself said Nevada's ore is worth more than a million men to the Cause."

So it ran. Some of the others argued that it was fantastic to believe that Rebs were raiding in Nevada; they maintained that the hold-ups were pulled by a shrewd

wild bunch headed by a man with brains. Jeff grew weary of listening. When his meal of steak and potatoes came, he gave his whole attention to it. He had posed as a down-and-outer, to bait Len Ballou, but he had really been mighty hungry.

He was at the far end of the counter, and nobody was paying any attention to him. When his grub was put away and he sipped his coffee, he took out the letter Ballou had given him. He studied over it a moment, then decided he could open it and then obtain a new envelope—and the man who was to receive would never know it had been opened. He ripped off one end of the envelope. And read Ballou's few lines:

"Friend George: This will introduce Jeff Mundy who is from Texas. He is a discharged Confederate officer, and needs a job. He'll probably make a good wrangler and all-around handyman for Rogue's Station. Give him a trial. If he doesn't measure up—in the right way—you will know how to dispose of him. Very truly yours, Len Ballou."

Jeff read the letter a second, and a third time. He frowned over it. He suddenly realized that though Ballou had been fooled, he still had been cautious enough to warn Foulard not to trust Jeff Mundy too far—at first. Those few last words had a sinister ring: ". . . . you will know how to dispose of him."

* * *

Later, lying abed in a cubby-hole room in a cheap hostelry, Jeff kept thinking about that letter, and about Len Ballou and the unknown George Foulard. Jeff knew he'd made a good start. The return of the stage after the holdup had been to his advantage. Otherwise, he would have had to mark time until Ballou completed his trip to Salt Lake City.

Jeff had been watching Ballou for several days, but, being new to the Nevada section of the Overland, he had moved carefully—until tonight. Jeff had been a special agent for the Overland, on its eastern section, and had been sent to Nevada only because Chris Amberton, another special agent, had needed help. Amberton's job had been to smash the wild bunch preying on the treasure-carrying stages. His job had ended with a bullet in the back.

Jeff had found Amberton being cared for by a doctor in Carson City. The man was dying, but he rallied just before the end. "Ballou, the lawyer at Virginia City, is one of them," he had managed to gasp. "I know—but I have no proof. You'll have to find the evidence—somehow."

With Amberton, it had been merely a job. For Jeff Mundy, it was a more personal thing. He would never forget that the girl he was to have married had been aboard one of the stages that had been held up. Amy Carter had been going home to Virginia City after a visit to relatives in St. Louis. She had been young and full of happy laughter, and a bullet had robbed her of life. The road agents had jumped the stage in the middle of the Nevada desert, opening fire on the racing coach without warning.

It had been the first raid that rumor had put down to a band of Confederate sympathisers. And it had been a fiasco. The westbound stage had carried no strongbox. After that first error, the wild bunch had raided only eastbound stages—carefully picking only those carrying specie. There had been a dozen holdups, and the loot ran into several hundred thousand dollars. Grief had come to Jeff Mundy, then an anger akin to madness. If the company hadn't sent him out to Nevada, he would have quit his job and come on his own. For he had stood by Amy's grave and sworn that he would avenge her.

IN THE morning, Jeff left the grubby hotel and, with his bedroll slung from his left shoulder, made his way to the same C Street restaurant for breakfast. As he ate, he was plagued by doubts. This trip to Rogues' Station might be a wild goose chase. It might well be that George Foulard had no connection with the road agents. There might be a simpler, quicker way to smash the wild bunch. Perhaps there was a way to get at Len Ballou—a means of baiting him.

But despite his doubts, Jeff decided that he would go to Rogues' Station. It was in the heart of the *malpais*, and Ballou's friendliness with the agent there might be the lead that was needed—the evidence the dead Amberton had failed to find. His breakfast eaten, Jeff made his way to the stage company office. Stage time was eight o'clock, though yesterday Ed Hanks had started out late in the afternoon because of the cloudbursts that had flooded low places.

Four of Hanks' passengers were trying it again this morning, and only Len Ballou was missing of those who had been aboard the raided stage. Three new passengers, two men and a woman, were also on hand. Luggage and mail was loaded into the rear boot, and the passengers climbed into the coach. Jeff sought out the driver, Sam Yeager, a weathered old teamster with years on the Overland service.

"Mind if I ride up on the box with you?" he asked.

"Always glad for company," Yeager replied, eyeing Jeff with a mixture of suspicion and curiosity.

There was neither treasure nor shotgun messenger aboard; the gun-guard was not needed, for it had been noted long ago that the wild bunch did not molest passengers. That fact was responsible for the rumor that the band, stealing only Government specie, was made up of Confederate sympathisers. Ordinary road agents robbed passengers.

The driver climbed up, and a hostler handed him the ribbons. Jeff mounted to the seat and threw his bedroll back onto the coach top. He kept his rifle between his knees. With a wild shout and a crack of his whip, Sam Yeager got the coach rolling. The six half-tamed mustangs headed out at a run. The rig raced out C Street, took the down-grade, and the sage flats and alkali desert stretched out ahead. It was twenty miles to the first relay station—and more than one hundred fifty miles to Rogues' Station.

"You the hombre who's headed for that God-forsaken Rogues' Station?" Yeager asked.

"That's right," Jeff replied. "Got a job out there. I'm going to try wrangling for awhile."

"Helluva place for a young fellow like you to take a job."

"How so?" asked Jeff. It still seemed best to keep the role he had assumed: that of a stranger in need of a job. He had no reason to distrust Sam Yeager, but as far back as the history of stagecoaching went there had been rumors of alliances between some whips and road agents. On his job, Jeff Mundy had long ago learned to trust no one—too far. "What's wrong with Rogues' Station?" he inquired in a suspicious voice.

CHAPTER TWO

Death in the Devil's Graveyard

SAM YEAGER took a chew of plug tobacco before he answered. Then, talking around his cud, he said, "It's a lonely spot, and only the devil would like it. Nothing but wasteland everywhere around it. I've heard talk that there's an outlaws' hideout nearby—a kind of Robbers' Roost. I haven't been that far on this run lately, but last time I was to Rogues' Station there were some tough looking hombres hanging around."

"You know the agent, George Foulard?"

"Yep," Sam Yeager grunted, and spat tobacco juice. "Yep, I know Foulard. A queer cuss. Unfriendly as they come. A dude."

"Hard man to get along with?"

"Reckon so."

Jeff said, "Sam, you ever been held up?"

"Sure. Four, five times," the burly driver said. "Mostly on the other side of the Sierras. Only was stopped once on this run. That was a month ago."

"Where'd it happen?"

"Close to the Utah line."

"You figure it was the same wild bunch that robbed the stage yesterday, and killed Ed Hanks and his gun-guard?"

"I'd swear to it," Yeager growled. "Tell you why. When I was stopped, there was near a dozen masked men. Ordinary stage robbers don't work in big bunches like that. Those hombres were organized, and they worked smooth. Bang! A rifle shot got my shotgun messenger. I pulled up pronto—and those masked sons rode up as easy as cavalry troops on a parade ground. The leader was the only one who did any talking, and he was as polite as a politician the day before election."

Yeager paused while he swung the Concord around a rocky curve. Then: "This masked leader told the passengers they wouldn't be molested, then told me to throw down the Wells-Fargo box. And he said, 'Driver, tell your employers that this will be considered a contribution to the Confederate cause.' "

"Rebels in Nevada, Sam?"

"I'm only telling you what was said," Yeager replied. "And those hombres who jumped Ed Hanks yesterday worked in the

same easy, polite way—after they'd killed Ed and his gun-guard. The passengers claimed that the leader of the band told them that the loot would be sent to Jeff Davis' government. Sure; it's the same ornery crew pulling all these hold-ups. They chased the little road agents—the ones who work alone or in pairs or by threes—out of Nevada!"

The trail stretched on and on across the Nevada desert and bleak rock hills. There was a relay station where horses were changed every twenty or twenty-five miles, and at midday and at six in the evening there were stop-overs at home stations where the passengers could climb out for a rest and a hasty meal. The sturdy horses raced across dusty alkali flats and toiled through vast stretches of sand. Once the trail cut through a vast salt bed, as glaringly white in the sun as snow. The rig swung along at eight and ten miles an hour, hour after hour, and the halts at the stations—log or adobe shacks by the road—were brief. The sun went down behind the coach, and a purple-tinted haze blanketed the desert. Darkness came, but the Overland rolled on.

Jeff still rode up on the box, but Martie Long had taken Yeager's place during the stop at the High Point way station. Martie was a sullen sort who talked only to his horses, so Jeff braced himself and dozed off. Except for the darkness, stage travel by night was no different than by day. The Concord coach swayed and lurched and bounced, and the horses tore along at the same wild gait. The dust was as choking as ever, and if, with the sun gone, the passengers shivered instead of sweated, their discomfort was just as great. The distance between relay stations was the same, and at midnight there was a stop at Hanlon's Place, which was a longer one during which the passengers could stretch their legs and get something to eat.

Beyond Hanlon's Place, there was a relay station at Concho Creek. It was the last station before Jeff's destination. Martie Long talked enough to tell Jeff that they would pull into Rogues' Station about five o'clock, a little after sunup. Jeff slept some more, but was awake as the sky began to lighten in the east. *This,* he thought, *is the beginning of the end—for me, or for the Ballou-Foulard crowd.* His hands closed tightly about the rifle that lay across his knees.

The going was slower now, more difficult. The road climbed and dropped, twisted tortuously though a rocky wasteland that Martie cursed and called "the devil's graveyard, sure." In the first pale dawn, it resembled just that. The jutting rock formations, the stone spires, the great boulders, could have been weird or obscene tombstones. Once, where the trail was narrow, a landslide of gravel and sand and rock blocked the way. There was no going around the obstruction, so the driver took a shovel from the rear boot and fell to work. Jeff climbed down and rolled some of the bigger rocks off to the side. The sun came up while the stage was stalled, and an hour was wasted.

A mile farther, the rig rolled out of the rocky wastes. The horses raced along a level road across empty flats. Far ahead was a rising cloud of yellow-white dust. Jeff said, "Wagons ahead."

"Yeah. Freight or emigrant wagons," Martie Long muttered. Then a moment later, he was more interested. "Trouble out there."

"What do you mean?"

"Listen."

JEFF listened, and above the noise of horses and coach he caught the sound of far-off gunfire. Many guns were cracking. Jeff knew the sound well enough, for, as he had told Len Ballou, he had been at Bull Run—though not wearing Confederate gray. But he could not yet see what was happening.

"Indians?" he asked Martie Long. And the taciturn driver growled, "Nope. The Utes haven't been causing any trouble lately."

The speed of the stagecoach was not slackened, and now Jeff could make out more than the dust cloud. There were two small canvas-topped wagons and a large number of horses or mules bunched up on a high rise of ground. The whole outfit seemed to be milling crazily, and it took Jeff a little longer to figure out what it was up to. The men with the wagons and cavvy were trying to turn back away from some rocks where some men were hidden. The outfit had run into an ambush, and was trying to pull back from the blazing guns.

The trouble was not far from the left side of the road, and now, with the stagecoach drawing close, Jeff saw that there were a dozen men and as many horses there among the rocks. "Pull up, Martie!" Jeff yelled.

"Like hell!"

"Pull up, I say!"

The stage was past the ambuscade, and no shots were fired at it. Jeff shoved the muzzle of his rifle against Martie Long's right ribs, and yelled again, "Pull up!" The driver swore and hauled back on the ribbons and kicked the coach brake. Horses and Concord came to a jolting halt close to the endangered emigrant outfit. Jeff swung down from the coach, circled it at a run. He shouted and waved to a big bearded wagoneer, trying to get the outfit in to the road and close to the stage. He saw the bearded man swing his rig around, then he dropped down behind a boulder and levelled his rifle across it.

His position out-flanked the ambuscade, and he methodically fired shot after shot into the men and horses bunched up among the rocks. Bedlam broke out there. Some of the horses broke away, and one was hit and fell thrashing. Jeff saw a man throw up his arms and grow limp, and slowly fall. He could hear the ambushers cursing savagely, and saw some of them try to reach him with six-shooter fire. But it was too hot there among the rocks. Some of the men mounted and rode off to the west. Others started running after the escaped horses. Only two kept firing, and even they slowly retreated.

Behind Jeff, the emigrant outfit was crowding onto the road. Jeff looked around and saw the stagecoach was gone. Martie Long hadn't stayed to fight. From out of the dust and confusion, a man came running. He dropped down beside Jeff and levelled an old muzzle-loader across the boulder. His blue eyes were bright with excitement. He was hatless and he had a heavy thatch of yellow hair. His pink cheeks glinted with a silken down. His old rifle roared. But the ambush crowd had scattered out of range.

"Take it easy, partner," Jeff told him. "It's over."

"They'd have got us, if it hadn't been for you, stranger!"

"My name's Jeff Mundy."

"Mine's Eli Benson," the emigrant youth said, and thrust out a friendly hand. "I'm mighty glad to know you, Brother Mundy."

Only then did Jeff realize that he had saved no ordinary emigrant outfit. Eli Benson was a Mormon. And Mormons, like treasure-bearing stagecoaches, made good pickings for road agents.

JEFF reloaded his rifle, then walked with Eli Benson along the road to where the wagons and horses had been halted. The young Mormon explained that the outfit belonged to Zachary Wade who was traveling from Salt Lake City to a Mormon colony in California. The big black-bearded man in the one wagon was Wade. He had his family with him, and it was made up of two middle-aged women, his two teen-aged sons, and his twenty-year-old daughter. Eli added that he was a hired hand.

"We had no trouble until this morning," he went on. "We camped last night at Rogues' Station, then started out at daybreak. We saw those outlaws coming toward us. They started shooting before we guessed they meant trouble. When Zachary and I fired back, they took cover among the rocks."

"They sure did a lot of shooting," Jeff said.

"At first, they didn't try to hit anything," Eli said. "They fired over our heads. I figure they wanted the loot without killing anybody."

Jeff and he were close to the outfit, and Jeff began to understand why the ambushers had shown such poor marksmanship. It had been deliberate. The two young sons of Zachary Wade were mounted and handled the cavvy—twenty head of unusually fine horses. The outlaws wouldn't have wanted to kill such horseflesh; the animals were too valuable. It was quite likely, too, that they hadn't wanted to kill or injure the Mormon women—Zachary Wade's daughter was a beauty. And the two women in the second wagon, though somberly attired and apparently in their late thirties, were attractive. No, the outlaws had wanted to take both horses and women alive. Jeff realized that he had done these people a great service.

They still hadn't recovered from their fear, but none showed signs of hysteria. Zachary Wade called, "They've gone, Eli?"

"Yes, sir. And we've got Jeff Mundy,

a right handy stranger, to thank for it."

Zachary Wade looked at Jeff, muttered, "Friend, I owe you a great debt. . . ." His voice trailed away, and Jeff only then saw that the big Mormon patriarch was wounded. He sprang forward, but Wade came tumbling from the wagon before Jeff could give him a hand. Wade fell to the ground and lay in a heap. But he still lived. Bending over him, Jeff made sure of that.

Zachary had hidden his wound from the others, until pain and loss of blood robbed him of consciousness. The man's great will had kept him on the wagon seat, with the reins in his weakening hands, and it had snapped only when he learned that his people were safe. The women and the girl and the two youths came gathering about. But Jeff saw their helplessness. Zachary Wade was so entirely the head of his family that now, with him lying unconsicous, the others knew not what to do. Even Eli Benson seemed rattled.

Jeff Mundy took charge. He ordered the two boys back to their horses, telling them to stand guard. He did not believe the outlaws would return; he simply wanted fewer people in the way when he did what he could for the wounded man.

The girl, whom Eli called Deborah, had been mounted when Jeff first saw her, so he told her that she too should watch against a return of the outlaws. "You, Eli," Jeff said, "start a fire. We'll have to heat water."

The two women were kneeling beside the unconscious man, and Jeff told them to fetch cloth for bandages. "Water and a kettle, too," he said. "Bring a sharp knife. And if you have any medicine or ointment that'll do for wounds, I'll need it."

He kept them busy. When Eli got the fire going, Jeff had him help get the wounded man on a blanket and rig up a canvas to shelter him from the sun. Jeff opened the blood-sodden clothes and located the great gaping wound in his left side. He frowned. It wasn't going to be easy, probing for the lead slug in that wound.

AN HOUR later, they lifted Zachary Wade onto the blanket and very carefully placed him inside his wagon. Room had been made among the household gear within the rig, and the man's wife was to ride inside with him. Wade had regained consciousness, but he was weak and full of pain. Fever was at work in him, too, and he was in for a bad time of it. Jeff and Eli and the two boys, Adam and Jason, had helped place Wade in the wagon. When they were outside again, Jeff saw that the three were still looking to him for guidance.

"It'll be a long hard pull for Zachary," Jeff told them. "He shouldn't be bounced around in a wagon while he's weak."

"We can't camp here," Eli protested. "Those blamed outlaws—"

"You could head back to Rogues' Station," Jeff told him. "I'm headed for there, myself, and I'll look out for you."

Eli looked doubtful. "The agent there, George Foulard, sure wasn't friendly when we stopped last night. Me, I don't know what to do."

"I'll keep Foulard from bothering you," Jeff said. "Let's get moving."

He climbed to the seat of Zachary Wade's wagon, took up whip and reins. When he got the rig rolling, he looked back and saw the rest of the outfit was following. He also saw two horsemen, far across the desert flats. They were watching the outfit, and Jeff knew they were members of the wild bunch. The outlaws apparently were still out to get their greedy hands on the Mormon outfit.

It was no more than seven miles to Rogues' Station. The post lay just beyond a rocky rise of ground, and was composed of three adobe buildings and a pole corral. There was a creek at the back of the post, with some scrub cottonwoods and yellow-flowering creosote bushes growing along its banks. The two smaller adobes were stable and granary, and the large building, facing the stage trail, was the stationhouse. Martie Long's stage had been there and gone. A man watched the Mormon outfit approach, from the stationhouse doorway.

Short of the station, Jeff swung the outfit off the road and headed for the tree-lined creek. He halted the wagon team, climbed down with his rifle, Eli Benson rode over to him.

"Anytime you need me," Jeff told him, "I'll be at the station."

"You've done enough for us already, friend."

"Still, you owe me nothing," Jeff said, smiling. "I'll be over to see Zachary, and

the rest of you every now and then."

He headed for the station, and a paunchy bald man eyed him from the rear door of the house. The man had a flour-sack apron tied about his broad middle, and Jeff took him for the cook. Jeff asked, "Foulard about?"

"You'll find him around front," the man replied indifferently.

Jeff went on and found George Foulard in the front doorway. He was puffing on a cheroot, and he was scowling. Jeff took Len Ballou's letter from his pocket and offered it to him.

"Len Ballou sent me out here with this letter, Mr. Foulard."

"You the hombre who dropped off the stage back the trail?"

"That's right. My name's Jeff Mundy," he answered.

Foulard took the letter and said grudgingly, "Martie Long dropped your bedroll off. It's inside." He tore open the envelope and read the few lines Ballou had written. "So you're a Texan," he asked, looking up, "and a discharged Confederate soldier?"

"I was a cavalryman," Jeff said. "So I'll make a good wrangler."

"All right; you've got a job. I've been shorthanded here, and had to look after the horses, myself. From now you'll take care of the horses and the stable. There are two stages through here every day, one eastbound and the other westbound. You'll be kept busy."

Foulard had been sizing Jeff up all this while. Except for his sullen frown, he was a handsome enough man. He was as tall and wide-shouldered, and of about the same age as Jeff himself. As Sam Yeager had said, Foulard was something of a dude. He wore a black broadcloth coat, gray breeches, a flowered vest. A black string tie adorned his white silk shirt. He had a natty black mustache, and his hair was carefully brushed. To Jeff Mundy's mind, George Foulard would have been more at home on a city street than at a lonely desert stage station.

Foulard seemed to have made up his mind about his new hand, for he suddenly relaxed and took a cheroot from his pocket. He lighted it, then said, "Mundy, why the hell did you side those damned drifting Mormons?"

CHAPTER THREE

Showdown at Rogues' Station

JEFF was taken by surprise, but he told himself quickly that this was a time for caution. Foulard would be harder to outsmart than the pompous Len Ballou; the man's steel-gray eyes were sharp, and his mind was certainly keen. Jeff shrugged.

"Like Martie Long must have told you," he said, "a band of outlaws had jumped the Mormons. I figured Martie would help those folks. He didn't say he wouldn't. He just pulled out, and left me afoot."

"Marty has good sense, Mundy."

"How so?" Jeff asked. "Didn't he want those Mormons helped?"

"Sure, he did," Foulard replied. "But Martie knows that it's best not to meddle in what goes on in this *malpais*. That's how I manage to keep my health—by not meddling. Those Mormons know this is outlaw country, yet they are fools enough to take the risk of traveling through it. That string of horses would catch the eye of any road agent within a couple hundred miles of here. Besides, every gun-hung son in the badlands knows that Mormons always travel with plenty of money. By siding them, you've probably made some bad enemies."

"Well, the damage is done," Jeff said. "But I'll be safe, so long as I'm here at Rogues' Station."

"That's where you're wrong," Foulard told him. "Those outlaws stop by here sometimes." He paused and puffed on his cheroot. Then: "With those Mormons here, they're sure to show up. I'll do what I can to keep them from jumping you. And you try not to rile them up."

Jeff nodded. "I'll watch my step," he said, then headed for the stable.

* * *

As Foulard had said, there was plenty for Jeff to do. A dozen horses were stabled at Rogues' Station, and they had to be kept watered and grained. Their stalls needed cleaning, and some of the animals needed attention. Several had harness sores and one a pulled tendon. Having grown up on a ranch and served as a cavalryman, Jeff knew how to go about the work and he took it in stride. Shortly before five o'clock, the westbound stage pulled in. Jeff had six fresh horses ready to replace the six blow-

ing and lathered animals that had just come in.

Eight passengers descended from the Concord and went into the stationhouse for a meal. Foulard came out to watch Jeff handle the horses; then the stage driver said, "Letter for you, Foulard." The agent took the letter and went inside.

Jeff had the fresh relay in harness before the driver was ready to pull out. The driver was Saul Bateman who had at one time worked east of the Salt Lake and had only recently been transferred to the west run. He had eyed Jeff on arrival, and recognized him, but said nothing. Now he walked around the horses, inspecting the harness job. He halted close to Jeff, who was holding the near leader.

"What in blazes you doing here, Mundy?"

"Working as wrangler, Saul. But you don't know me."

"That's right, I don't," the driver said, quick to understand. "Looks like you've done an all-right job. Hold those critters till I get the passengers aboard."

Saul went to the doorway and bawled, "Time to roll," and the passengers came out. Some of them were carrying parts of their meal. With everyone aboard, Jeff handed the ribbons up to Saul Bateman. With the usual wild yell and crack of whip, the westbound dusted out.

JEFF had turned the used up horses into the corral so that they could cool off before he watered them. McCloud, the baldheaded cook, called Jeff in to supper. Jeff washed up at the creek, then went to the house and took a place at the long table in the main room. The cookie had already cleared away the passengers' dishes, and now set out a place for Jeff, one for Foulard, and one for himself. The grub was dished up, and McCloud had to call Foulard from the small back room which was the agent's living quarters. When Foulard came to the table, he still had the letter in his hand. He had read it, and it seemed to Jeff that its contents had given him a jolt.

Foulard ate little. There was worry in his metallic eyes. When he had finished his meal, he pushed his plate and cup aside and took out another cheroot. His hands were trembling as he lighted up.

"Look, Mundy," he finally said. "Did Ballou say anything about coming out here soon?"

"He said it'd be in a few days or maybe a week. Something wrong?"

Foulard was thinking aloud, rather than sharing a confidence, when he muttered, "I'm in the devil's own fix. My fiancee is on her way to California with her father. They're from Baltimore, but Louise wrote me while on the way West. She sent the letter from St. Louis."

Foulard rose and began pacing the floor, like a man bedeviled. "Louise wants me to travel to California with her," he went on. "I can't leave here, now. . . . Yet if I don't, it'll look queer to her. And to her father. He's a shrewd old fool, and he never did trust me. Dammit! Her letter doesn't even say what day they'll come through!"

He lapsed into a sullen silence but continued his pacing. McCloud was clearing the table; he never spoke except in answer to a question. Jeff rolled and lighted a quirly cigarette, and, though he did not realize it, his face had grown dark and stiff. He watched George Foulard with a rising anger. The man was in an ugly mood simply because the woman he was to marry was coming to visit him at a time when he was involved in something he didn't want her—or her father—to know about. It seemed in that moment that Foulard almost hated the girl.

Jeff Mundy almost said, *Look, Foulard. My fiancee too traveled west on the Overland, and less than fifty miles from here she died. She was murdered, Foulard. Murdered by men who are your compadres!*

Foulard said savagely, "Women always complicate things. Why couldn't she wait until I sent for her?"

It was too much for Jeff. He shoved back the bench and left the table. He strode from the house. Had he stayed, he would have lost control of himself. He would have flung accusations at Foulard, and the two of them would have gone for their guns. And nothing would have been accomplished. Foulard or he would have died, but no evidence against Len Ballou would have reached the law or the Army. . . . The wild bunch wouldn't be stopped with a showdown between George Foulard and Jeff Mundy. More than that would be needed.

Jeff strode to the corral, to care for the horses. And to work away his rage.

Shortly after full dark, two men came riding east along the stage trail and swung in to Rogues' Station. They dismounted and entered the adobe house. Jeff Mundy left the dark doorway of the stable, and made his way to the window on the east side of the 'dobe. It was a small square window with a single pane that had gone long unwashed. Jeff could hear nothing of what was said between Foulard and the visitors, and because of the dirty pane he could not clearly make out the two strangers.

A bottle and glasses had been set out, and the three men drank. Then they stood by the table talking, all earnest of manner. One stranger was thick-bodied and red of face, the other was lanky and dark. The mark of the desert was on them. Alkali dust filmed their shabby clothes. Both had need of a razor.

Jeff heard too late the stealthy footfall behind him. The point of a knife was against his back before he could turn.

"Snooping, Mundy?" growled Baldy McCloud. "Don't try anything, mister. That's a butcher knife at your liver. Head inside!"

The knife jabbed through Jeff's shirt, and he knew that McCloud would surely drive it deeper if he wasn't obeyed. Jeff walked around front and into the house. And Foulard demanded, "What's this?"

McCloud explained with a few words, and by now Jeff had an excuse ready. He said, "I saw two riders come up. I just wanted to make sure that they weren't some of the wild bunch that jumped the Mormon outfit this morning. You know how it is, Mr. Foulard."

He was watching the two strangers rather than Foulard. They had whirled around, and each still had his hand to his holstered gun. Jeff was somehow reminded of some wolves he had run into as a boy, one hard winter along the Texas Brazos. These two were human wolves.

The dark lanky hardcase muttered, "Well, did you ever see us before, mister?"

"No; can't say that I did," Jeff replied, making a show of stupidity. "I'm pretty sure you weren't in that bushwhack crowd."

The burly man relaxed somewhat, but the dark man was not satisfied. Foulard said, "Mundy's all right, boys. He comes highly recommended—by my friend, Len Ballou." He looked squarely at Jeff, and his steely eyes were still sullen and worried. "I'll vouch for Payson and Lukens," he stated. "They weren't with that wild bunch. They've been prospecting these parts—for a long time. Have a drink, Mundy. You too, Baldy."

Jeff had the drink, to make it look right. But never before had he drunk with a more vicious quartet. Payson and Lukens might claim to be prospectors. Foulard might pose as a stage station agent, and McCloud as a cook. But all four of them were mixed up in an ugly game of murder and robbery. Jeff was sure of that. For Payson and Lukens had been with the crowd that ambushed the Mormon outfit.

AFTER that one drink, Jeff went to the building where the grain and hay were stored. He had already taken his bedroll there, and, before dark, had cleaned up the bunk that had been used by the previous hostler. An empty whiskey bottle with a candle jutting from its neck stood on the floor. Jeff lighted the candle, then opened his bedroll. Among his few possessions—razor, soap, spare shirt, tobacco sacks, comb, etc.—he found the stub of a pencil and a scrap of paper. He wrote, in the laborious way of a man handier with a gun than with a pencil, "John—Please send my spare boots to Rogues' Station. I need them pretty bad. My old ones are about done for. Your friend, Jeff Mundy."

The brief note completed, Jeff folded it and tucked it away into his shirt pocket. He had a smoke, then stripped to his underwear and turned in. As he snuffed out the candle, he heard Payson and Lukens ride away from the stationhouse.

* * *

Jeff's second day at Rogues' was uneventful. The eastbound stage came through on time, at five in the morning. When it was gone on its way, Jeff had breakfast with Foulard and McCloud. There was no talk at the table, and as soon as he was finished eating, Jeff went back to the stable. Later, with the horses cared for, he walked over to the Mormon camp. Everything was in order there. Zachary Wade was resting comfortably, and it was certain that he would recover from his wound. The two boys, Adam and Jason, were cutting some small cottonwoods to build a lean-to

shelter. The women were busily cooking at an open fire. The horses were at graze.

Eli Benson was mounted and keeping watch, and he told Jeff that the outfit would camp there for a week. The young Mormon was troubled, however. He seemed to expect trouble.

"If trouble comes," Jeff told him, "it's sure to be at night. You and the boys can spell each other standing guard, Eli. If those road agents show up, fire a shot right away—and I'll come running."

He went back to the station and again busied himself about the stable. That evening, when the westbound stage rolled in, he saw that Foulard watched the passengers climb from the coach. The man sighed with relief when he found that the only woman aboard was the middle-aged wife of a Virginia City mine-owner.

The stage driver was an old-timer, Reb Harper, and Jeff knew he could be trusted. Handing him the note he had written during the night, Jeff said, "Reb, will you give that to John Whiting at the Overland office in Virginia City?"

Harper knew him but was unaware that he was a special agent for the company. And even if Reb was curious enough to read the note, he would find nothing unusual about it. He wouldn't know that the boots Jeff wanted were something else—help to wipe out the Ballou-Foulard wild bunch. Whiting was already primed; he was a clerk in the Virginia City office, and he would give the note to the superintendent of the Overland's Nevada section. Harper said, "I'll see that John gets it, Jeff."

Half an hour later, he pulled out. Darkness came, but that night no riders showed up at Rogues' Station. Jeff slept with rifle and six-shooter within easy reach, but he was not roused by any alarm shot from the Mormon camp. It was the calm before the storm.

THE morning eastbound stage arrived an hour late, and Len Ballou was one of the passengers. The pudgy lawyer carried valise and gold-knobbed cane. He gave Jeff a friendly nod, then he greeted George Foulard—and his eyes lost their friendliness.

Jeff changed the horses, then stood by the team until the driver was ready to pull out. Len Ballou did not climb aboard with the other passengers. He was staying over at Rogues' Station, and Jeff thought, *Something's up. Something's going to happen!*

Ten minutes later, Ballou called him into the house and said, "Mundy, I figure that I hold you in my debt. That night in Virginia City, I could have taken your life. Instead, I gave you a chance. You got this job because of me. How do you feel about it?"

Jeff looked from Ballou to Foulard, then to the lawyer again. Foulard's face was dark red with fury. He stood in the middle of the wide room with his hands thrust into his pockets. He was chewing on an unlighted cheroot. Ballou had pulled one of the benches away from the long table, and sat watching the agent. He was leaning on his cane. Jeff said carefully, "You're right, Mr. Ballou. I owe you plenty."

"Good," Ballou said. "I want you siding me, Mundy."

"Sure, Mr. Ballou."

"It's like this," the lawyer went on. He never took his eyes off Foulard. "I came out here for a showdown with Foulard. I've just told him some things that may cause me to lose my life—if I'm not careful. If he calls for that cut-throat, McCloud, you pull your gun. You savvy?"

Jeff nodded.

Foulard growled, "That's crazy talk, Len. Why would I want to kill you? Hell, we've been friends for years!"

"That's all over, George," Ballou stated. "We're friends no longer. I'm done trusting you. I started for here a few days ago—last Monday. The stage was carrying specie—thirty thousand dollars. Your crew held it up, George. That was all right. That was our agreement—to rob Yankee gold and silver shipments. But, dammit, I won't stand for needless killings! The driver and shotgun messenger on that stage were gunned down without warning, in cold-blood, dying without a chance to defend themselves or surrender!"

"My crew gets out of hand," Foulard muttered.

"Still, it's your crew," Ballou went on. "And you boss it through that brother of yours. Seven people have been killed by your crew in the last six weeks, Foulard. I figured it was because the shotgun messengers put up too much of a fight. But now I know better. Your crew is running wild,

George. They're killing without reason!"

Foulard was squirming. Sweat glistened on his forehead.

Ballou's voice hardened. "That's only one thing, George," he said. "When we made our agreement, it was decided that only men sympathetic to the Confederate cause should be taken on. Men like Jeff Mundy, here. They were to get only a small share of the loot—enough to keep them in supplies and horses and guns. The idea was that they were to be guerrillas—soldiers without uniforms. It hasn't worked out that way, George."

"What do you mean?" Foulard demanded.

"You know what I mean," Ballou retorted. "Since the deal was started, thirteen stages were held up. The loot, according to Wells-Fargo, amounted to more than three hundred thousand dollars. Most of it was United States Government specie, sent east by the Frisco mint. My idea was that we could take that money and turn it over to the Confederacy. That would be according to the rules of war, and I, as a Confederate agent, am duty-bound to help my cause and hurt the Yankee cause—as much as possible. It isn't working out that way, George."

Foulard said nothing, and Jeff Mundy was all ears.

Ballou took it up again, "The loot was brought here to you, George. You were to send it to Randolph at Washoe Flats, so that he could smuggle it through to Texas—then to Richmond. I've a report from Randolph. So far he has received only fifty thousand dollars, George. Fifty thousand out of more than three hundred thousand!"

"Randolph's a liar," Foulard broke in. "He's got the money—all of it!"

"Randolph is an honest man," Ballou shot back. "He's a trusted Confederate agent. He got only a piker's share of the loot. You've been cutting your crew in on it, George. And you and your brother Bert have cached the rest. You're a thief and a traitor, George. And now I'm done with you."

Ballou rose. He was a pudgy dwarf alongside George Foulard. But then he drew the needle-like blade from his cane—and he was as dangerous as a coiled rattler. Jeff knew that he had all the evidence he needed. What his next move was to be, he did not know. But when Foulard shouted, "McCloud!" Jeff drew his six-shooter.

CHAPTER FOUR

Stage of Thundering Death

JEFF swung toward the kitchen doorway and saw the cook coming with a gun in one hand and his butcher's knife in the other. McCloud flung the knife—with expert skill—and only by leaping sidewise did Jeff dodge the razor-sharp blade. He fired at McCloud and missed; then the cook's weapon blasted. There was a commotion behind Jeff as he fired again—a curse, a scream, a shot. He did not turn however, for McCloud, though hit, kept coming and shooting. Jeff shot him a second time, and finally McCloud fell.

Swinging around, Jeff saw that Len Ballou was swaying drunkenly and holding his hands to his round belly. The cane sword lay at his feet. Foulard was running for the doorway. Reaching it, he swung around and fired at Jeff with a pocket gun. Jeff felt, in his right arm, something as hot as the touch of a heated branding-iron—and knew he'd been hit. The six-shooter dropped from his suddenly numb hand. He quickly went after it, grabbing with his left hand. When he straightened, Foulard was gone.

Jeff kept away from the door, afraid he'd walk into another shot. He started for the kitchen and the rear door, but Ballou called his name. He swung back in time to see the lawyer fall. There was a look of death about Ballou, but when Jeff knelt beside he was still conscious.

"Mundy, listen—" Ballou gasped. "Take a horse, head for Washoe Flats. It's thirty miles south. Find Randolph. Tell him the loot must be cached here. Tell him he'll have to be quick!"

"I'll get Foulard first," Jeff said.

"No! He's too smart for a man like you. He was too tough for me. . . ."

Jeff rose from his knees, for Len Ballou was dead.

* * *

Foulard had a start, now, and Jeff was sure that he'd try for the stable and a horse. Foulard would try to reach his wild bunch—and return for the cached loot. Jeff left by the kitchen door, and he'd been right

about Foulard trying to escape. The man had made for the stable, but he'd run into Eli Benson. The Mormon had heard the shooting, and Jeff guessed he had been on the way to give him a hand. Eli had his rifle, but Foulard had gotten the drop on him. Even as Jeff stepped from the stationhouse, Foulard grabbed away Eli's rifle and forced him to dismount from his sorrel gelding. And Foulard mounted.

With Eli within range, Jeff risked no tricky left-hand shot. He ran however, his six-shooter lifted and cocked. But Foulard swung the sorrel around the corner of the adobe stable and was gone from sight.

Eli came running to meet Jeff. "What's wrong?" He waited for no reply, noticing that Jeff was dripping blood. "You're hurt!" he exclaimed. "You better let me fix you up!"

Foulard was now riding hard out across the desert flats.

Jeff thought of that message for help he had sent on yesterday's westbound stage, and knew that whatever help might come would be too late. The end of the game would come long before the big wigs of the Overland Express could send men from Virginia City. He submitted impatiently to Eli's ministrations, for his wound was a small thing. Foulard's bullet had merely torn its way through the fleshy part of his forearm. But Eli stopped the bleeding, cleansed and bandaged the injury.

"You were lucky, Jeff."

"This game's not over yet," Jeff replied. He told his Mormon friend about Len Ballou and George Foulard, and the ugly game they had been playing for so long. He finished by saying, "Ballou figured Foulard has a big part of the loot cached here. He'll be back for it—with his tough crew. Eli, you better break camp and move away. If you and the Wade family are still here when Foulard gets back, his crew will finish what they started the other morning."

Eli nodded. "I'll move out," he said. "But what about you?"

"I'm going to try to find Foulard's cache," Jeff replied, "then clear out, too. I won't have a chance against that wild bunch."

"I wish I could help you."

"You can't, partner," Jeff told him. "You look out for your own people. Now get going!"

When Eli had gone back to the Mormon camp, Jeff made up his bedroll and went to the stable. There were a couple of saddles, and he threw one on a big gray gelding that looked like a good trail horse. He lead the animal over to the stationhouse, left it ground-hitched, and went inside. He ignored the two sprawled bodies, and went to the room where Foulard had bunked. He began a swift but thorough search, and the loot was easily located.

There was a Saratoga trunk—locked, to be sure, but easily opened with a .45 slug. Jeff lifted the lid while the smoke of his shot still hung in the room. Some neatly laid out clothes filled the trunk to the very top, but they made up only a small layer. Beneath Foulard's dudish effects he found the specie—leather bags of gold and silver coins, so fresh from the mint not a single one in the bag Jeff opened had lost any of its brightness. The trunk held a fortune. It was too heavy to handle. And Jeff wanted to move it, to hide it where George Foulard, when he returned, wouldn't find it.

Jeff left the room, crossed the wide main room, and stepped through the doorway. The horse stood six steps away, and when Jeff made the third step a rifle cracked. The slug came so close that Jeff heard the vicious whine of it. He reeled back, and none too soon. There was another shot. The slug thudded into the adobe wall just behind him. He fell back into the doorway, then saw that he was trapped. Two men were on the rocky rise of ground just west of the station, commanding the whole stage post with their rifle fire. They were far off and half hidden among the rocks, but Jeff was certain they were the two hardcases, Payson and Lukens. There was no sign of George Foulard.

Jeff muttered an oath. He couldn't get the treasure away. He doubted that he could escape, even empty-handed. With the next shot, he was sure of it. The gray gelding screamed shrilly and went down in a thrashing heap. In less than a minute, the animal was dead.

Jeff fired half a dozen shots from the west wall window, but the two outlaws dropped down behind the rocks. He couldn't get at them, and they couldn't reach him so long as he kept forted up. But the odds were against Jeff, and he knew it. Foulard

had posted those two on the rise while he gathered the rest of the wild bunch, to keep him, Jeff Mundy, penned up. Until darkness came, Jeff knew, there was no chance of making a successful break. And Foulard would certainly return before nightfall, with enough men to overwhelm Jeff's one-man defense.

The day was endless. Jeff covered the two bodies with blankets. He felt nothing at all toward McCloud in death; the cook had been a vicious killer. But he could not judge Len Ballou; the pudgy lawyer had been doing what he considered his duty as a Confederate agent. He'd embraced a Cause, one good in his sight, and his mistake had been thinking that men like George Foulard could put patriotism ahead of personal greed. At noon, Jeff ate a hasty meal in McCloud's kitchen. He kept watch constantly, yet never dared show himself for more than an instant at front door or west window. The snipers on the rocky rise were trigger-quick.

Jeff could leave by the kitchen door and move about the east side of the house. But he was afraid to cross the wide space to the stable, where he could have gotten a horse. And even if he had made the stable, it would have meant certain death to ride out. The Mormons had left their campsite. Jeff could see the outfit moving eastward, already a mile or more away. They, at least, had a chance of getting safely away. By mid-afternoon, the slow-moving outfit was gone from Jeff's sight.

As the sun lowered, Jeff began to grasp at hope. Once the sun was down and dusk crept over the desert, he could make a break. It would not take full darkness to hide his movements. But it was still daylight when other riders joined Payson and Lukens on the rock-studded rise that overlooked Rogues' Station. There were a dozen of them up there now, and the newcomers had come in from the west. George Foulard was with the hardcase crowd.

JEFF'S hands grew sticky gripping the rifle, and he felt sweat bead his forehead. There was an emptiness in his belly that was not hunger. His lips felt parched. He knew now how a doomed man felt in the last few minutes before the hang-rope tightened. Yet if Jeff Mundy was afraid, it was normal fear. He did not lose his nerve.

His name was shouted—by Eli Benson!

Jeff's surprise made him stare dumbly when he came from the station-house. He had difficulty believing his own eyes. But there was Eli Benson and six heavily armed Mormon men. They were dismounting.

"I heard shooting when we pulled out at noon," Eli said excitedly, "and I figured some ornery sons had you trapped. Late this afternoon, my outfit met a Mormon freight caravan. I told them what you'd done for Zachary Wade—and about your trouble. These men offered to come and side you." He nodded toward the biggest Mormon, a burly black-bearded man. "This is Jonathan Wade—Zach's brother."

Jonathan Wade stepped forward and shook Jeff's hand, saying, "We owe it to you, friend, for what you did for Zachary. Now what do you want us to do?"

Jeff had no chance to answer. Outlaw guns began to roar. A Morman horse was hit, and fell dead without a sound. The other horses stampeded, milling wildly between the station buildings. Big Jonathan Wade barked orders, sending two of his men to the granary and three to the stable. "Inside!" he yelled to Eli and Jeff.

Bedlam broke out. Foulard's band was already streaming toward the station, their rifles and six-shooters blasting. From the three adobe buildings, an answering fire met them. And in that first wild moment, the westbound stage came rolling in.

The stage driver tried too late to swing his horses and make a getaway. An outlaw bullet knocked him from the box. The stage horses snorted wildly, began to pitch and muck, then, swinging about, smashed the Concord coach against the corner of the stationhouse. Passengers screamed, and several jumped from the coach. And the outlaw band now swarmed around the house, firing at doors and windows.

Not even a company of cavalry could have bucked those forted up guns, and suddenly Jeff could find no target. Through the roiled up dust and powdersmoke, the surviving outlaws were fleeing. Other guns besides Jeff's had gone silent, and Jonathan Wade yelled, "They're on the run! They're pulling out!"

Jeff saw two riders hightailing it west along the trail. He left from the doorway and fired two shots after them, but the outlaws were already beyond rifle range.

Three others joined them, and those five alone fled from Rogues' Station. Jonathan Wade, grinning through his whiskery brush, said, "That does it, Brother Jeff! I'll go see if any of my men are hurt."

Jeff saw two sprawled dead men within twenty feet of him. They were the outlaws he had dropped. One was Payson; the other Jeff did not know. Walking around the corner of the house, Jeff saw the wrecked coach. Two men were crouching behind the coach, and Jeff said, "It's over. You can come out."

The stage driver, with a wound in his shoulder, already had the coach door open and was reassuring the passengers. The stage horses stood still, but they were wall-eyed and quivering. . . . Going on, Jeff saw two wounded outlaws—pain and fear on their faces. He disarmed them, and left them to lie there. A dead outlaw lay farther on, and another lay sprawled by the rear of the house. Over by the stable, the Mormons were gathering about Jonathan Wade. Only one was wounded.

Jeff turned back, and saw that seven passengers from the coach now stood with the wounded driver. One of the seven frightened people was a young, fashionably dressed woman. There was fear and horror in her eyes, but it seemed to Jeff Mundy that she was far more calm than the men. He tried to explain, to assure them there wasn't anything more to fear. The tall distinguished man who stood close to the girl broke in, "Where is George Foulard, the station agent? My daughter and I came West especially to visit him. Has anything happened to him?"

Jeff said uneasily, "Are you the girl George Foulard is to marry, Miss?"

"Yes," the girl said softly. "Yes, I am. I am Louise Hadley."

"You may as well know it now, Miss Hadley, for you'll find it out later," Jeff told her. "George Foulard was the leader of that outlaw band. More than any man, he is to blame for a dozen other raids like this one. And if he's still alive, I'm going to kill him—or take him alive so that he can be hanged!"

He heard the girl's gasp, but he was already turning away from the shocked passengers. He went into the house and placed his rifle against the wall. He started across the main room, then saw Eli Benson sprawled in the kitchen doorway. Eli's face was bloody. He gasped, "Watch it, Jeff —Foulard!"

Jeff swung to the doorway to Foulard's private room. He saw the man taking a bag of specie from the trunk. He drew his six-shooter, and called out, "Foulard!" The man came jumping to the doorway, money bag in one hand and gun in the other.

"You fool!" Jeff yelled. "You risked your life for your greed!"

He swung his six-shooter up, and his shot echoed Foulard's. Jeff heard a scream. But it was not Foulard's scream, even though the man was hit and falling to the floor. Jeff turned and saw Louise Hadley had followed him into the house. He moved quickly, so he blotted out the sight of Foulard's body. The girl seemed near collapse, and Jeff reached out to steady her. She did not shrink from his touch. Instead, she gazed at him levelly.

"I knew— Somehow I knew something was wrong here," she whispered.

"You'll cry a little," Jeff said gently. "And the memory will be with you a long time. But time makes everything grow dim. I know."

"You—?"

"The girl I was to have married," Jeff said, "was killed in a raid on a westbound stage. It was almost more than I could bear, at first. But the living have got to go on living."

He turned from her, then, and covered Foulard's body with a blanket. He went to Eli Benson, who was now sitting up with his back to the wall, and trying to wipe blood from his face. The Mormon youth grinned, wryly.

"I'll fix up that cut on your head, partner," Jeff said, then looked around on hearing a sound behind him.

Louise Hadley stood by him, and asked, "Can I be of any help?" And Jeff, looking up into her courageous eyes, nodded and said, "Yes, if you please." At a time like this, it was best for a woman to be busy. And it would be good to have such a girl as this working at his side. Jeff saw Eli Benson dividing a look between him and the girl. Eli might in pain, but he managed to smile over some secret thought.

THE END

SECOND-STRING HEROES

THEIR SADDLES EMPTY, THEIR GUNS AND LAUGHTER STILLED, BUT THE WEST THEY BUILT LIVES ON.

by ROBBINS AND WAGGENER

ELIAS WELLS

1

Caldwell, Texas was a town ruled only by swift guns in the hands of strong, quick-tempered men. Yet Caldwell s greatest war hero was mild-voiced, peaceable Elias Wells, and he was a man who never fired a gun in all his life. Instead he devoted his time, hopelessly, trying to raise funds for a sorely-needly hospital.

2

At the outbreak of the Civil War, the youths of Caldwell scrambled into uniform—all but Elias, who flatly refused to take part in any killing. The town, strong for the Southern cause, turned against him. His father, a warlike, fire-breathing, retired army colonel, made no effort to stop the armed citizens' committee that called on his son and told him, with drawn guns, "Enlist, or else!"

3

Elias put up no fight. "All right, I'll enlist," he said cheerfully, and went down to New Orleans and signed up as a male nurse. Then the stories of this hero's exploits began to filter back from the battle fronts. Under fire, he carried ten men off the field at Bull Run. Wounded, he saved fifty more at Vicksburg. Then, at Chancellorsville, a shell took off his right leg—but did not prevent him from saving the life of the famous Conferedate General Hooker.

4

As the homecoming hero climbed off the train, his scrawny chest bright with ribbons and medals, he was met by a brass band, presented with a solid gold key to the city. He turned it back. "I still want that hospital," he said. This time, he got one, and over the door a repentent though unlettered citizenry inscribed, in deathless marble, "We was all fools, Elias, but we learned some, and we're sorry!"

NAIL THEIR HIDES

CHAPTER ONE

Fist-Fight on Main Street

THE burial was over, and the big crowd that had filled the little cemetery to overflowing began to straggle slowly back to town.

Ray Delbert fell in with the rest and moved along silently, sunk deep in his own thoughts. He became aware of John Zimmerman, walking along beside him.

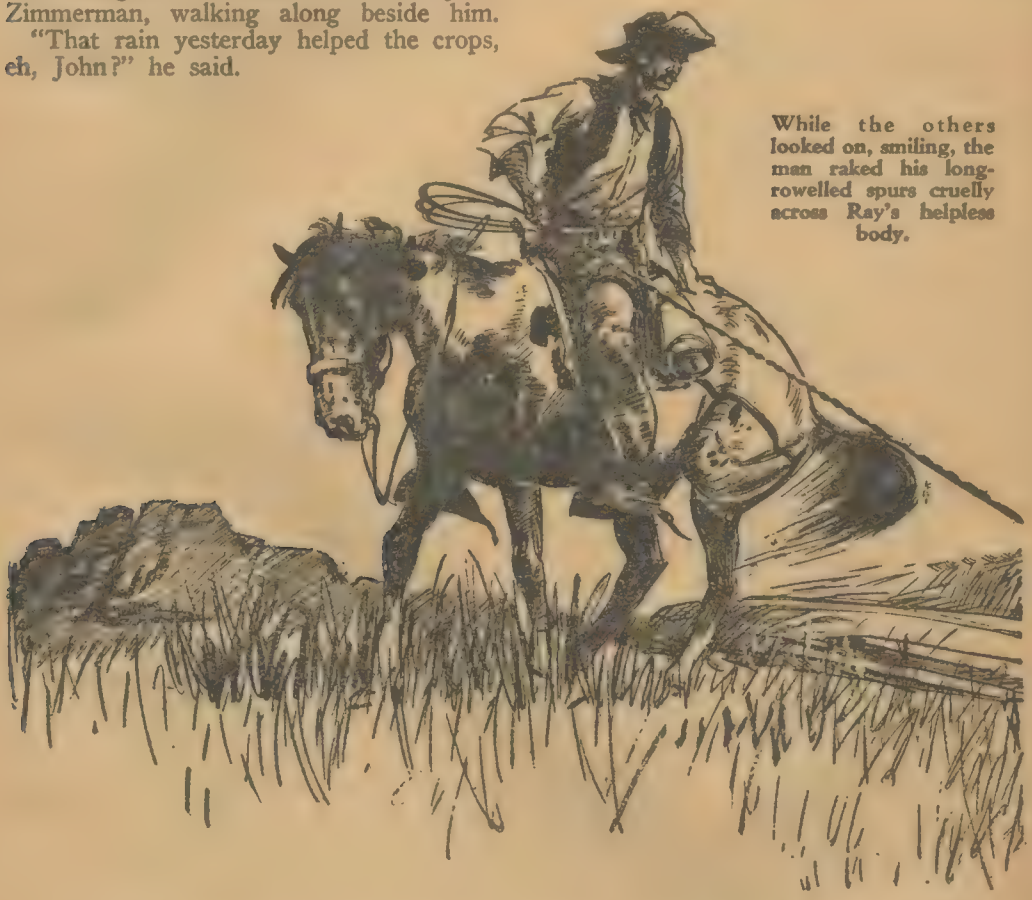
"That rain yesterday helped the crops, eh, John?" he said.

Zimmerman shook his head. "A bad day," he muttered. "A bad, black day for Benton County."

Ray frowned until he realized that Zimmerman wasn't talking about his crops.

"You mean Mack Dodge?" he asked in surprise. "We've all got to go sometime, John. Mack had his share of life and success."

Zimmerman slanted a look at Ray from



While the others looked on, smiling, the man raked his long-rowelled spurs cruelly across Ray's helpless body.

It was a black day for Benton County when they planted Mack Dodge, but it was worse for Ray Delbert. For that tough-luck rancher was exiled from the little spread he'd fought and bled for, damned as a traitor to his neighbors and finally branded as the red-handed murderer of the last man on earth he'd want to kill!

TO THE FENCE! ★

under his craggy eyebrows. He was Pennsylvania Dutch, in his fifties, and bowed with the weight of a lifetime of hard work. He'd been farming two years now, down on Harbor Creek, and Ray had found him to be a good neighbor.

"Not Mack Dodge," Zimmerman said. "God rest his soul. He was a hard man, but a just one, according to his lights. No, it's not Mack Dodge that I'm mourning now."

Ray's head jerked up in surprise. "Lordy, John, you're looking for trouble where there ain't none," he said. "Mack's death won't change things. Anse McGurn is still just the Diamond D foreman."

Zimmerman shook his head with dogged insistence. "I got a feeling, Ray. It won't go away, that feeling. Up there"—he jerked a thumb back to the cemetery—"when the deacon was praying and everybody had their heads down—I looked up. Anse didn't have his head down. He was looking around, with that funny grin on his face."

"Imagination!" Ray grinned. "Anse has a knife cut on one side of his mouth. It makes him look like he's grinning."

Zimmerman shook his head and started to reply, but just then Mrs. Zimmerman caught up with them and slipped a firm arm through her husband's.

"I've got to go to the store, John," she said. "You come along. No short one for you at the Longhorn."

John nodded and allowed himself to be led away. But he looked at Ray over his shoulder. "I hope I'm wrong," he said.

Action-Packed Range Novelette

By JAMES SHAFFER

Ray just nodded and kept on going. He had no wife to tell him to stay out of the Longhorn, and he thought a spot of bourbon would go good just then.

He was cutting diagonally across the street toward the Longhorn when he saw the Diamond D surrey pull up in front of the Drover's Hotel. He remembered that he hadn't expressed his regrets to the Dodge heirs, and decided to let the bourbon wait a few minutes.

Mack Dodge had left two children—Martha Dodge and her younger brother, Jamie. They were both in the surrey, along with two Diamond D hands. One of the men jumped down and held the team's head while Martha and Jamie got to the ground. It was the first time Ray could remember Martha wearing a dress, and the effect of it hit him solidly.

Jamie clambered out of the surrey and shot a quick glance toward the Longhorn, but caught his sister's glance and jerked his eyes away.

"Sober, by golly," Ray thought wryly. "Wonder how long it'll take Jamie to drink and gamble his share of the Diamond D away?"

Only a month before, Jamie had returned from one of his wild sprees down on the Border, and the whole county had heard Mack Dodge roar about the debts he'd run up down there. Anse McGurn had ridden down that way and picked up Jamie's IOU's, paying out old Mack's money. Maybe, Ray thought, Martha will keep a tighter rein on him, now that she'll be running things.

As he stepped up on the sidewalk, he saw Anse McGurn come out of the hotel and approach the two. He was big, and it had been years, the rumor was, since he'd soiled his hands with any actual work on the Diamond D. He was as tough as he was the first day Ray had seen him, four years before.

He looked at the big foreman now, remembering Zimmerman's words. It was common knowledge that Anse hated the farmers Dodge had allowed to settle around the Diamond D. Anse had argued with his boss against that. But old Mack Dodge had a mind of his own.

The country was growing up. Settlers were moving in fast. And Mack Dodge figured the best way to keep the Diamond D intact was to let hand-picked farmers settle around its borders. He could control them, and they would act as a buffer against any one else moving in.

John Zimmerman was one of those. And so, in a way, was Ray. Ray was no farmer. He was breeding Hereford cattle on his little place. And Mack Dodge had been much interested in that new breed.

"MISS Dodge," Ray swept his hat off as he approached the group. They turned and Ray saw the grief—and something else—that lay deep in the girl's eyes. It shocked him a moment, for he realized it was fear he saw in her eyes.

"What the devil you want?" Anse McGurn moved deliberately to place himself between Ray and the girl. And then Ray saw that the big foreman was pretty drunk. Anse must have been drinking all morning, for there hadn't been time since the funeral to get drunk.

"Anse!" Martha Dodge's voice stopped the big foreman in his tracks. "There are some things—" she said brittlely, then her voice broke off suddenly. "Step aside."

Anse took his time moving. He did it with an insolent deliberation that made Ray want to drive his fist in his face. But he didn't. He merely looked at Martha Dodge and Jamie. Martha met his gaze head on; Jamie's eyes slid away.

"Just wanted to express my regrets, Miss Dodge—and Jamie," he said. "Hadn't a chance to do it till now."

"Thank you," Martha Dodge said levelly. "I—we appreciate your thoughtfulness."

"And now that you've had your say, nester," Anse McGurn grunted, "maybe you'll—"

Ray swung around. He tried to put a grin on his face, but he knew he wasn't succeeding very well. "Did you say nester, Anse?"

McGurn's face turned redder than the liquor had already made it. The scar near his mouth jumped and jerked nervously. "Yeah, damn it—I said—"

"Anse!" Martha's voice stopped him again, and then she turned quickly to Ray. "How are your Herefords?" she asked hurriedly. "I know Dad was very much interested in them. He said that the whole range would be covered with them in a few years—"

Ray watched her desperate attempt to cover the awkward situation, and he helped her along by picking up the conversation in an easy, natural way. He was vaguely aware that Anse and Jamie drifted off the porch and headed for the Longhorn saloon. But he saw the tragic look in the girl's eyes as they followed the two men.

He put his hat back on and tried to draw away and leave, but the girl kept the conversation going. She talked rapidly about his Herefords, about the farmers' crops; about the condition of the range. But Ray saw her eyes widen for a moment, as she stared down the street.

Ray turned. John Zimmerman and three other farmers were hurrying up the street. They were headed for the hotel and Martha Dodge. Ray twisted around. Anse McGurn, Jamie Dodge and four Diamond D hands were lounging in front of the Longhorn Saloon. It wasn't the scar that was putting the grin on McGurn's face now. He was laughing openly.

"Miss Dodge!" Zimmerman said as he came up. "I want to talk with you. Anse McGurn has been passing talk around—he just told Ed here that—well, I reckon you know."

"Our arrangement with Mack Dodge was supposed to be permanent," Ed Headly broke in. "But McGurn says—"

"Yeah, McGurn says to git the hell offa Diamond D land!"

They whirled. Anse was leading his little bunch of men across the street. All except Jamie. The younger Dodge heir looked across the street a moment, then ducked into the Longhorn. Anse McGurn swaggered to a stop at the worn boardwalk in front of the hotel. The four Diamond D riders halted with him, spreading out a little.

"I knew it," John Zimmerman said in a flat, dead voice. "I knew it."

"Then you ain't surprised!" Anse McGurn jeered drunkenly. "Maybe you already got your things packed."

"Anse!" the girl said sharply. "It was agreed—"

"What the hell difference what was agreed?" Anse grunted. "They got to be told sometime, and what better time than now?" He waved his hand. "The farmers are all in town now, in case they want to make something of it!"

Ray Delbert stepped back carefully, letting his eyes rove up and down the street. There were farmers in town, all right, and there was something else! All along the street, strange men were lounging around, hard eyed, silent men that he'd not seen before in Benton.

And he realized with a start that they were new Diamond D hands, and that they were already taking Anse McGurn's orders. For every man was carefully keeping watch on every farmer in sight.

"A nice set-up," Ray said softly. "If the farmers start anything now—Diamond D'll finish it—quick!"

"Catch on fast, don't you, nester!" Anse grinned wickedly, and Ray stepped toward him. But John Zimmerman was quicker. He shoved himself between the two men, then faced Martha Dodge.

"Miss Dodge, we want an answer—now! Is this Diamond D's new policy? You know our arrangement with Mack Dodge. We were to farm the land and pay him for it in hay and other crops we raised. We've brought our families here and built our homes along Harbor Creek. The arrangement was supposed to be permanent."

Ray Delbert was only half listening to Zimmerman's words. He was staring over the man's shoulder at Anse McGurn. The big ramrod had stepped forward to meet Ray before Zimmerman had interposed.

Now McGurn stepped back slightly. His eyes shuttled across the street, and Ray, following his glance, saw Jamie Dodge's white face peering from the window of the Longhorn.

"There's two heirs to the Diamond D," Anse told Zimmerman. "Don't you reckon we'd better get Jamie in on this?"

"Jamie!" There was disgust and contempt in Zimmerman's voice. "I'm sorry, Miss Dodge, but everyone knows you'll be running Diamond D. We want your answer."

Anse McGurn seemed to be enjoying the whole thing. He laid his leering glance on Martha Dodge and brought up Jamie's name again.

"Reckon you better make the decision without consulting Jamie, Miss Dodge?" he asked, and Ray caught the sly undertone of mockery in his voice. Ray looked at the girl, and he felt a vast pity well up in his heart at the sight of her strained face.

"I think we should talk this thing over, Miss Dodge," Ray said. "We can find out what's wrong here and straighten this whole thing out. We can find out—"

His words seemed to crystallize the girl's determination. Her chin came up and she stared straight into his eyes.

"There is nothing wrong here, Mr. Delbert," she said.

"I think there is," Ray snapped. "Something that—"

"Mr. Zimmerman," she broke in ahead of Ray, "as you know, there were never any papers signed between dad and any of you farmers. Which means that you have no legal claim to your land."

"So you're going through with it?" John Zimmerman said in a half whisper.

"I'll have to ask you to vacate the land along Harbor Creek," Martha Dodge said crisply. "Dad made a bad deal when he allowed you farmers to settle there. Diamond D needs that land back!"

There was a stunned silence for a moment. Even though they'd been expecting to hear those words the actual sound of them had come as a shock. Anse McGurn had a free rein to do what he'd been wanting to do for so long: drive the farmers off of Harbor Creek.

Ray watched the grin spread over Anse McGurn's face, as he hitched at his gunbelt and squared around to face Zimmerman and the rest.

"You heard her!" he snarled. "I'm giving you forty-eight hours to git off Diamond D land. After that, I'll be down to move you. Savvy!"

He glared at them. John Zimmerman stared back for a moment, then dropped his gaze. Ed Headley did the same. Ray saw their shoulders sag, and they turned to walk off. Anse watched their backs for a moment, then whirled, his finger jabbing in Ray's face.

"That means you, too, nester!" he rasped.

RAY hit him then. Almost casually, he brushed the finger aside, and drove his fist hard into McGurn's face. But the blow wasn't casual. It carried the pent up hatred that had been building within him since he'd known the swaggering foreman. He felt the shock of the blow along his arm and the sharp bite of pain as McGurn's teeth sank into his knuckles.

Anse McGurn grounted like a steer that's been kicked in the belly. His big frame rocked a moment with the blow, then he staggered backwards. Ray heard Martha Dodge's gasp as he drove into McGurn again.

He saw the four Diamond D men start to close in around him, and heard Martha Dodge's crisp order to stay out of it.

McGurn had recovered quickly. His bootheels dug in and he stopped his backward stumble. His head lowered; a curse rumbled out of his bleeding mouth and he charged.

His fists landed on Ray's face with a numbing force. The pain shot through him like a red hot poker, then his fists were finding McGurn. He drove them savagely into the mans face; felt the shock of them landing; saw the bloody splotches they raised and saw McGurn's face twist in pain.

The man stumbled backwards again, and this time Ray gave him no chance to get his defense up. He went after him fast, pumping blows into the foreman's face; following him backwards as the man tried to get away long enough to regain his balance.

Then they were in the middle of the street and McGurn was staggering to a stop. Ray took his time and slugged him twice; hard, deliberate blows right to the face. McGurn stumbled, his eyes glazed and he went down.

"Freeze, everybody—this is as far as it goes!"

Ray became dimly aware of that voice, and he turned to see Sheriff Jim Reedy coming up the street with a shotgun held hip high. And it was then that Ray noticed that those cold-eyed men had closed in around him; forming a tight little circle.

"Break it up, break it up!" Reedy yelled. "It was a fair fight—I seen it all. It was fair—and it's all over!"

The hardcases drifted backwards, and the sheriff stalked forward until he was standing beside Ray. The crowd, eyeing the sheriff's shotgun; kept a respectable distance. But the silence was profound, and Reedy's voice carried easily to everyone in sight. He gestured to Anse.

"So you done it?" he snapped wearily. "What good'll it do you? Now I'll have to try and protect you till you git out of the county."

Ray wiped the blood off his face with his shirt sleeve. He grinned down at the sheriff.

"I ain't goin', Sheriff," he said. "I'm staying here—and fighting for my rights!"

CHAPTER TWO

Escape from Diamond D

FOR a moment, there was dead silence in the street. The only sound was the heavy, rasping breath of Anse McGurn. Finally, Martha Dodge spoke.

She stepped off the boardwalk and walked out to Ray and the sheriff. "Do I have to remind you again that you hold no deed to your property?" she asked crisply. "Everyone knows that you're on Diamond D land!"

"Maybe. Maybe not," Ray said tightly.

"No maybe about it," Sheriff Reedy broke in harshly. "You're on Diamond D land—the same as the rest of the farmers, Ray."

"And I'm on there by arrangement with the owner," Ray said.

"Not by the present owner!" Jamie Dodge's voice broke in. Jamie had pushed through the crowd and his voice was high pitched and quivery. "You git off my land, Ray Delbert!"

"I tried to go at this thing right," Martha Dodge said. "Tried to give you farmers a chance to leave without trouble—or bloodshed—"

Ray whirled on the girl, and the scorn lay heavy in his voice. "Don't turn my stomach with your prattle of trying to do right!" he rasped. "You're deliberately breaking your father's word to these people—throwing them out of their homes; I don't know what your game is, but I'm not falling for your bluff."

Martha Dodge shot a helpless look at her younger brother, then her chin tilted defiantly. "I have no game. The Diamond D wants that land back. Sheriff Reedy, I'll expect you to help in getting these people off my land."

Anse McGurn got to his knees. He steadied himself that way a moment, then pushed himself to his feet. One eye was almost closed; his mouth was a bloody pulp. He swayed for a moment, as the dizziness left him, then his teeth bared.

"We ain't gonna need no help," he rasped. "Not from no damn lawman. The Diamond D'll take care of its own."

Ray Delbert grinned flatly. "Then I'm calling on Sheriff Reedy to help me protect my property," he said. "And I'm serving notice that I'll shoot the first Diamond D men to trespass on that property!"

"Now listen here, Delbert!" the sheriff snorted. "That kinda talk is plain silly—why hell! everybody knows you're squatting!"

"What is this you're saying, Ray?" John Zimmerman asked eagerly. The old Dutchman had pushed his way closer, and now his eyes were bright with renewed hope. "What is this talk about your property? Did you buy from old Mack?"

Ray shook his head. "I own my property—the same as you own yours, John. The same as we all own our property along Harbor Creek!"

There was a general surge of people then, as the farmers pressed close to hear what he was saying. He looked around and saw the bewildered hope stamped on their faces. Hope—and doubt. Ray turned to face the sheriff.

"Reedy—we've all got claims to our property. Not deeds to the land—no. But claims, just the same. In the form of receipts from Mack Dodge. We turned certain portions of our crops over to old Mack, and he gave us receipts for it. Those receipts will hold up in a law court! They're our claim to our property. And I intend to hold mine!"

Anse McGurn started to curse Ray in a low, steady voice, his hand dropping to his gun, but Sheriff Reedy shoved the muzzle of the shotgun against his stomach and ordered him to shut up. McGurn's eyes glittered with rage for a moment, but he shut up.

Ray turned. "John, git everybody together. We'll be leaving town, now. Peaceful like, I hope!"

It was like walking on eggshells to get out of town. Ray Delbert found himself holding his breath with tension, as the farmers retreated to their wagons. He lifted himself into the saddle and waited silently as the wagons began to file out of town.

Up the street, Sheriff Reedy was still standing in the middle of the street, his shotgun still trained on Anse McGurn's middle. The Diamond D hardcases stood around, waiting for some word or sign from Anse McGurn to open the battle.

But McGurn realized that this was no

time to start anything. The law wouldn't be on his side, even if he could get away from the sheriff's shotgun. Ray saw him shrug and stalk into the Longhorn saloon. Jamie Dodge started after him. Ray saw Martha call to her brother, but he kept on going.

Ray breathed easier. The Diamond D men began to drift off the street and into saloons. Sheriff Reedy tucked his shotgun under his arm and walked down the street. His face was haggard and drawn.

"You shore raised hell and put a prop under it," he said gratingly. "A range war! There'll be dead men, Ray—and nobody'll win it. Nobody ever wins a range war."

The same thoughts had been bedeviling Ray, and the sheriff's words brought a tight, hard knot to his stomach. He knew the farmers didn't stand a chance in a fight with Diamond D.

Those men Anse McGurn had brought in were professional fighting men. Killers. He doubted if any farmer in the group had ever fired at a man in anger, let alone killed anyone.

"I—I played a bluff, Sheriff," he said through stiff lips. "It was a hunch."

"And it didn't work," Reedy growled. "I'm gonna deputize about ten men and try to keep the peace till I can talk those farmers into leaving Harbor Creek."

"I'm not sure that my hunch won't work out after all," Ray told him. He leaned out of the saddle. "There's something wrong, somewhere, Sheriff. Martha Dodge doesn't want to run the farmers off. Couldn't you see that?"

The lawman nodded. "She looked like she hated herself for doing it, but," he sighed, "she done it, and that's that. I'm going out and try to talk those farmers into leaving the county peacefully."

IT WAS late afternoon and Ray was doing his chores when he heard the clop of hoofs. He stepped inside the barn quickly and picked up his rifle. But it was only John Zimmerman and two other farmers.

"Howdy, John," Ray greeted him. "No more trouble, I see."

John Zimmerman shifted uncomfortably in the old army saddle. "Sheriff Reedy's been talking to us since we got home. He followed us out."

"He said he was," Ray said.

The three were silent for a long moment. Then Zimmerman cleared his throat. "He figures we oughta leave. Says them receipts we got won't stand up in no court."

"I don't figure they will either," Ray told them.

"Huh?" Zimmerman ejaculated. "Then you—was bluffing today, Ray?"

He took a deep breath and faced them squarely. "I was that. And I think that the bluff will work. I don't think Martha Dodge wants to chase us off. It's been good business for the Diamond D to let you fellows farm Harbor Creek. And I've paid for the use of my land by giving Dodge Hereford steers."

"Then why'd she do it?" another man spoke up.

Ray was thoughtful a moment. "I figure she was pretty well broken up by the death of her dad. And I figure that Anse McGurn and that brother of hers talked her into it. I figure when she comes to her senses she'll tell McGurn to lay off. She'll make him fire those hardcases he's hired, and we'll have peace."

"But if you're wrong—" Zimmerman left the words hanging, a worried expression on his face.

"If there was any good reason for our leaving," Ray replied, "if Diamond D could make good use of the land we're using, we couldn't have a leg to stand on. We'd have to leave." He paused and took a deep breath. "But we're being driven out of our homes just so's one man can have his revenge. Just so Anse McGurn can swagger through Benton and brag about how he's the big he-coon."

"Then you think McGurn's behind the whole damned thing?" Zimmerman inquired slowly.

Ray nodded. "I figure that he talked Jamie into siding him, and the two of them argued Martha into it."

"And you aim to stay—to fight?"

Ray didn't reply for a long moment. He was thinking that he had no right to drag these people into a fight. He was thinking that it had been his temper that had started the trouble in town. If he'd shrugged off McGurn's drunken bullying—if he'd held his temper that morning—

He pointed to his windmill. "John, from that windmill, a man can see plenty far. Any attack on Harbor Creek would have

to pass my place first. If there was a man on that windmill, he could see Diamond D coming in time to get ready."

Zimmerman stared at the windmill, scratching his chin reflectively. Then he turned to his two companions.

"What d'ya say?"

"I've put a lot of work into building up my place," one said. "I'd hate like the devil just to walk off and leave it."

Zimmerman nodded and climbled out of the saddle. "I'll spend the night here, Ray, and we'll take turns watching. You boys go on home. Tell the rest what we plan to do. We'll fire three quick shots—in case of trouble."

Ray's hand shook slightly as he picked up his rifle. It was win or lose now.

THE night dragged out forever, it seemed to Ray Zimmerman took the first period of watching, and Ray went in to try and get some sleep. But he couldn't sleep. He only lay on his bunk, tense and alert; reaching over every now and then for the reassuring feel of his rifle. And he was glad when Zimmerman came in at midnight and called to him.

Morning broke quietly and peacefully. Another farmer rode over and reported that no one planned to leave Harbor Creek now. They all intended to stay and finish the thing. He relieved Ray on the windmill.

Zimmerman was jubilant as he poured coffee and ladled out the scrambled eggs for his and Ray's breakfast.

"Looks like Diamond D was just blowing off a lot of hot air after all," he chuckled. "If Anse McGurn had been so dead set on chasing us off—he'd of hit us last night."

Two more wary, watchful days passed without incident. Regularly, some of the men from the Creek would arrive and take their turn on the windmill tower. But there was no sign of any movement from Diamond D. On the morning of the third day, Ray whistled as he fixed breakfast for the man who'd just stood his trick at the lookout spot.

"McGurn's forty-eight hour deadline is gone and past," he chuckled. "And we're still here." He stared thoughtfully into his coffee cup. "I think today is the day to go over and talk to Miss Dodge. It's time we came to some kind of agreement—"

A thin call reached them from the windmill. Ray and the man from the Creek tumbled out of the house. The watcher on the windmill was pointing.

"Here comes somebody! Danged if it don't look like Jamie Dodge! And the way he's reeling around in his saddle—"

Ray didn't hear more. He trotted out past the barn and watched the man ride up. It was Jamie Dodge all right. The sight of the younger heir brought a wariness to Ray. He warned the lookout to keep his eyes sharp. The man on the windmill laughed.

"Don't think it's no trick, Ray," he said derisively. "Fact is, I don't think that young scallawag knows where he's going!"

Ray flung his saddle on his mount and rode out to meet Jamie Dodge. And as he approached the man, he realized the lookout had been right.

"Drunk as a hootowl," he muttered to himself. He rode forward. "Howdy, Jamie. Lost your way?"

After the second try, Jamie got both hands on the saddle horn and pushed himself erect in his hull. He regarded Ray owlishly.

"Reckon I know thish—this dam' range," he grunted. "Reckon I know where I'm goin', aw'right."

"Reckon you do, at that," Ray grunted. "And where are you going?"

"None of your dam' bus'ness," Jamie said flatly. Ray felt the hot anger flush through him, but he fought it down. He'd caused enough trouble already by getting mad at whiskey talk.

"I reckon it ain't none of my business," he said quietly. "I was just surprised to see you over this way."

Jamie hiccoughed. "Only reason I rode this way was to keep anybody from see—tha's none of your dam' bus'ness neither." They rode past Ray's barn, and Jamie hauled up in front of the watering trough.

"Only thing I want is to douse m' head in that trough—then I'll be on m' way," Jamie grunted, and almost fell out of the saddle. While Ray and the two men from the Creek watched, Jamie staggered over and sloshed his head in the trough. When he raised up a few moments later, he was a little more sober. He grinned.

"Me and my big mouth," he said. "Reckon I shot it off a little back there."

Ray shrugged. "Forget it." And then,

after a long pause, "Anything particular on your mind—what you're doing over this way or something?"

Jamie flushed again, and his lips clamped tight. "That's still my business, Delbert, but—" he stared at Ray a moment, then went on, his voice a little more friendly —"wish you'd do something for me."

Ray shrugged. "Anything within reason," he said guardedly.

"I'd like some grub and a bedroll," Jamie said. "I'll return 'em when I'm through with 'em."

"Plenty easy," Ray said, and led the way to the house. He gathered some bacon, beans, coffee and other supplies together; wrapped them up in a blanket, and tied the whole bundle up in a spare slicker. Jamie took the roll out and tied it behind his saddle. He stuck his foot in the stirrup, then hesitated.

"One more thing," Jamie said uneasily. "If anybody—*anybody*—comes looking for me today, tell 'em you ain't seen me. Is that clear?"

"As clear as mud," Ray said drily. "But —I'll do it."

"And then tomorrow," Jamie went on, "would you ride over and tell Sis that I passed by here today. And tell her that I've *gone back to do what I should have done a long time ago!*"

RAY regarded the young rider for a long moment, then nodded slowly. "I'll give you plenty of time to get a head start—before I tell anybody which direction you went."

There was a haggard look in Jamie's eyes. He glanced back once in the direction of the Diamond D, then turned his eyes toward the distant hills. The haggard look passed and Ray noticed the resolute determination in his eyes.

"You won't regret it, Delbert," he said, and touched spurs to his mount. Ray watched him grow small in the distance, then disappear over a distant rise.

"Now I wonder what the devil all that meant?" one of the Creek men asked, breaking the long silence.

"I don't know," Ray answered slowly, "but I got a hunch we'll be hearing more about this before many hours are over."

And he was right. It was about noon that day when the man on the windmill shouted again. Ray had been spending these last few days close to the house, and was repairing one of the corral gates when the call came. He walked over.

"It's Martha Dodge," the man called down. "Thought it was her when I first saw her—a long ways off, but waited till I was sure. Danged if this ain't surprising, Ray!"

Ray didn't think so. He'd more or less been expecting Miss Dodge since Jamie had ridden by that morning. And somehow, he had a feeling that all this tied in together, and that all of it had something to do with the Diamond D trying to move them off the land.

He noticed the proud tilt to the girl's head as she rode up—and then noticed the strain she was under keeping her head up that way. As she pulled up in front of him, he could read in her eyes that she was fighting panic. He wondered what that fear was.

Was it fear of Anse McGurn, now that Jamie had run out? He hadn't thought of that before, and the thought sent a cold, driving anger through him.

"Have you seen Jamie?" The suddenness of the question surprised Ray. He'd been expecting it, but when it tumbled from her lips, as if she couldn't hold it back any longer, he felt a distinct shock.

He remembered Jamie's words: "Don't tell anybody—anybody!" Jamie had emphasized that word "anybody." He must have known his sister would be out looking for him. And he didn't want her to know he was pulling out. Not today, Jamie had said. Wait till tomorrow.

He looked up at the girl, remembering all this, and realizing the dull, aching pain and fear he would cause this girl if he kept his promise to Jamie.

"Why, that's kinda funny question to ask me, ain't it?" he said, and tried to chuckle. "Jamie and I never hit it off none too good. Is—is there something wrong?"

"No—of course not," she said quickly, and then blurted out suddenly. "Jamie didn't come home last night. He's—he's done that often—" Ray turned his head and tried not to notice the quivering of her lips —"but I've always been able to ride in town and find him in some saloon. But the Longhorn said he rode out of town early this morning. I thought—that is—I,

hoped—" She broke off and her eyes bored into his eyes.

"When did you see him?" she asked quietly. "Don't lie."

Ray grinned crookedly. "Guess I'm not much of a liar," he said. "Jamie rode by couple, three hours ago. He was—"

"Was he alone?" the question shot out at him like a bullet.

"Yes ma'am." He told her what had happened. "Dousing his head in the trough seemed to sober him up some. When he tied that bed roll on his saddle and rode off, he was plenty sober."

"Why didn't you tell me at first?" she asked with relieved anger in her voice.

"Because Jamie told me this—and I'm trying to remember his words just like he said 'em—'Tell sis that I've gone where I should have gone a long time ago'—does that mean anything—"

He broke off with the embarrassment that a man always feels at the sight of a woman's tears. She tried to squeeze them back for a moment while Ray shifted awkwardly from one foot to the other. When she'd dabbed the tears away with her handkerchief, she looked down at him, and he noticed that the old fear and strain had left her eyes.

"Jamie said I wasn't to tell you that until tomorrow," Ray told the girl. "But you seemed so worried—"

"It's all right," she replied quickly, almost gaily. Then she looked around at the man on the windmill, and her laughter tinkled through the noonday heat. "You can let him come down now," she said. "You won't have any more trouble."

Ray laughed for the first time in three days. "I don't know what this has all been about," he said. "But I had a hunch that Jamie—that is—well—anyhow, Miss Dodge, I'm glad!"

"So am I" Martha Dodge said happily. "If you and the other farmers will meet me in town tomorrow afternoon at Lawyer Crump's office, I think we can make a deal."

"Hear that, Sam?" Ray yelled gleefully to the Creek man that was climbing down from the windmill. "It's all settled—or will be tomorrow afternoon."

"Lordy, that's good news, Miss Dodge!" the farmer said heartily.

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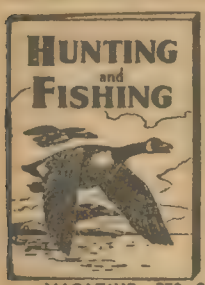

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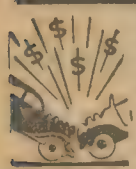

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RAY waited until he'd saddled and ridden off, then threw his saddle on his own horse and headed for the lower river bottom pastures. It had been three days since he'd ridden over his spread, and while Herefords didn't stray bad, he wanted to make sure they didn't drift in with the Diamond D stuff.

He tried to puzzle out what had happened between Martha Dodge and her brother as he rode along. Then he gave it up. All he knew was that the whole thing was over.

A faint swishing sound was his first indication of danger. He tried to twist in the saddle, to throw up an arm and ward off the rope that sailed through the air; but he wasn't fast enough.

The loop settled around his shoulders; his hand drove for his gun as it tightened, and his breath exploded in a curse.

"Dump 'im—fast!" Anse McGurn's voice rasped in his ears. Ray twisted and tried to throw the rope off, and at the same time get his gun free, but the man handling the rope was wise in the ways of its use.

The loop tightened around his shoulders and he was jerked free of the saddle. He hurtled backwards and hit the ground with a body jarring jolt.

"Damn you, McGurn—"

Anse McGurn leaped forward. His booted foot swept forward and crashed against Ray's wrist. His half drawn gun spun into the dust six feet away. The hulking Diamond D foreman stood spraddled legged above him; grinning down. A half dozen men were coming out of the brush that bordered the trail, a gleam of anticipation in their hard, cold eyes.

Knowledge of what was to come turned Ray's stomach into a hard knot. There would be no sympathy in this crowd; not an ounce of pity. And his gun was gone. His best chance was to break and run for it—

"Looks like you got me, Anse," he grinned and started to throw the rope off his shoulders. "What happens next—"

"This!" McGurn snarled. He jerked the rope sharply and Ray, halfway to his feet, was jerked off balance. In that instant, McGurn stepped in. He drove his fist straight into Ray's face. He saw the blow coming and tried to dodge. But it was no use.

The blow stunned him. He bent over on his back and tried to roll clear. And then a sharp, stinging pain ripped through his side as McGurn's sharp toed boot crashed into his ribs.

The rest of it was like a dream of pure agony. Time and again, he tried to get to his feet; almost made it and was shoved off balance again. And every time, he could hear Anse McGurn's roaring laughter, and then got ready for the pain of another kick. And then after a while the pain seemed to lessen; there would be whole minutes when he couldn't remember what was happening, and finally, blackness.

HE woke up coughing from the chill night air, and the strain of coug ng set a thousand lights dancing in his head.

Gradually memory flooded back through his aching head. He got to his feet, staggered a few steps and went down again. This time he lay quiet until he gathered strength to walk to Harbor Creek, a quarter of a mile away.

It took an hour of bathing his bruised body and head in the cool waters of the creek before he was able to think and act coherently.

Then he found his horse cropping grass near the trail. He returned to the spot where he'd been beaten and found his six-gun. Then he rode wearily home.

He wasn't surprised by what he saw. He'd been more surprised if the house had been standing.

As it was, there was nothing left but a smoldering heap of ashes. A vagrant night wind blew over the ashes, making them glow eerily in the night. There was nothing; nothing left but ashes.

His memory reached back to Jamie's trip that morning; and then he thought of Martha Dodge's promise. With this in mind he rode toward Harbor Creek.

And before he was in sight of it he knew he'd find the same scene he'd just left. The night breezes brought the scent of wood smoke in his nostrils while still a long ways off. A dirty gray dawn was breaking as he topped a rise and caught a glimpse of what had been the settlement.

The desolation was complete. He choked back a bitter curse and rode forward. He could make out vague, dim forms moving

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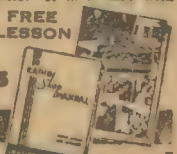

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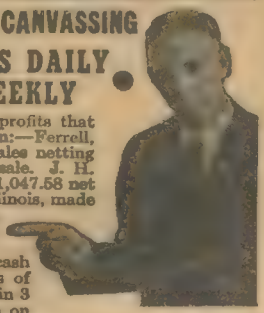

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through the carnage. He rode up to one and spoke.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" the man sneered, contempt heavy in his voice. "Well, keep the hell away from me!"

"My place is the same as yours—" Ray grunted through his puffed lips, but the other cut him short.

"I coulda pulled outa here with all my furniture, all my tools!" His voice rose hysterically. "Now what've I got? Nothing! Nothing! Not a damn thing but a wagon, one horse and a bullet through my arm!"

Ray licked his raw lips and tried to think of an answer. And after a moment of silence, he rode on. Then he saw a familiar figure.

"Zimmerman!"

"Haven't you done enough, Delbert?" Zimmerman rasped. "Leave us alone!"

"I don't understand you, Zimmerman!" Ray said hotly. "I've lost as much as the rest! I didn't force you to stay! I don't understand—"

"Maybe this'll help you understand!" a man snarled, and Ray reeled in the saddle as a rock struck his head. A loud yell of approval went up, and other rocks showered through the air. Ray's lips tightened as he touched spurs to his mount and galloped off.

He rode aimlessly, letting his mount pick its own way, but heading it off when it wanted to return to what had been home.

He vaguely realized that he was hungry, and thought idly about eating, then shrugged the thought away. Where would he get any food, anyhow? He might shoot a rabbit, but he had nothing to cook it with if he did.

Midday found him far down the reaches of Harbor Creek. His horse pricked its ears forward and nickered. Ray raised his head listlessly, then stiffened at the sight of a campfire. He turned to ride off, not wanting to meet or talk with anyone right now. But a man hailed him.

"Light down, mister, and have some grub," the man called out. Ray noticed that there were a half dozen men around the camp, and that there were a couple of tents in the background. The tents quickened his interest. Cowhands didn't pitch tents.

He rode forward, and saw the man's jaw drop in amazement at the sight of his battered face.

"I could use some grub," he said wryly. "Ain't had any since I ran head-on into that buzz saw." He chuckled at their surprised grins as he helped himself.

"This a dude hunting party?" he asked. "Them clothes you're wearing—them knee britches and high-topped shoes — shore weren't bought around these parts."

"We're a surveying party," the man told him.

Ray stopped eating. "Surveying? For what?"

"Railroad. She's coming right up Harbor Creek. Sticking by the creek the whole way so there'll be less grading to be done—"

"Railroad!" Ray spat the word out like a curse. He flushed, realizing that the men were staring at him in a queer fashion. "Thanks for the grub," he mumbled and stumbled to his horse. He flung himself into the saddle and sank the spurs deep.

A cackling laugh broke through his lips. No wonder the Dodges wanted their precious land back! Railroads pay big money for rights of way! There'd be a tidy chunk of coin for the Diamond D, just for the taking!

He thundered into Harbor Creek settlement to find the place deserted. McGurn had probably given them orders to move early that morning. Wagon tracks had left a wide, plain trail in the ground, and he swung along it at a fast clip.

His thoughts broke off quickly at the sight of four riders galloping toward him. He pulled up, puzzled. The man in the lead was Sheriff Reedy. As he drew near, the lawman drew his sixgun.

"Hold up, Delbert!" he shouted. "H'ist them meathooks! Snag that gun outta his holster, boys." He waited till Ray's gun was lifted. "Been looking for you, Ray. The farmers told me you'd ridden off down the creek, but I never expected to find you that easy."

"What the devil you want with me?" Ray snapped angrily.

Sheriff Reedy sighed. "Reckon you're gonna pull that old innocent gag on me," he grunted. "But you're caught—dead to rights. Jamie musta shore knocked you cuckoo last night—cause you forgot and left your rifle."

Ray stared at him, trying to make sense out of that statement. "Jamie? Gun?

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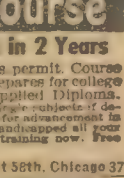

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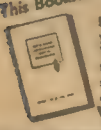

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You're drunk as a hootowl, Sheriff."

Sheriff Reedy spat drily. "Not me—you. Punchdrunk from the beating Jamie give you. So punchdrunk you wandered off and left your gun laying right where you shot him."

"Let me have the whole story, Sheriff. Slow like," Ray said slowly.

"Jamie Dodge's been missing since yesterday morning. Last night Anse McGurn and some men were out looking for him. They rode up on two fellows having a fight. Before they could butt in, one fellow knocked the other'n down. Then that gent started to walk off—but the hombre that was down grabbed a rifle and plugged him. In the back."

"Where'd all this take place?" Ray asked dully. But he already knew the answer.

North of your place—near Harbor Creek. Right where the trail runs through some brush."

He jerked his thumb toward town and Ray touched spur to his mount. The lawman and his deputies closed in around him. His mind raced around and around for a moment, then he jerked his head up.

"You sure Jamie had been fighting?" he demanded. "Jamie wasn't the fighting kind. He—"

"Jamie had been fighting!" the lawman rasped. "He was beat up almost as bad as you."

ANSE McGURN stepped out of the Longhorn and strolled across the street as the sheriff and his deputies rode in with Ray.

"See you got 'im, Sheriff," Anse grunted.

"Yep," the lawman grunted. "Git inside, Ray."

"Figure he'll git a quick trial?" Anse grunted slyly.

"He'll git one quick enough," Sheriff Reedy snapped, his head jerking up "but I ain't having no prisoner took from me, see?"

"The boys are shore upset about the murder of their boss," McGurn grunted. "You got good sense, Sheriff—you got better sense than to try and fight a whole mob—"

"Trying to make sure I won't live long enough to talk and prove that you killed Jamie, eh—"

McGurn snarled as Ray started to speak. He leaped forward, his big fist swinging. Ray saw the blow coming and ducked to one side. His movements were slow and painful, but McGurn was blind with rage, and he missed. Ray drove his fist into the foreman's stomach.

The breath hissed out of Anse and he staggered backwards. Wildly, Ray drove in, his fingers closing around the big man's neck. McGurn bawled and staggered backwards. Desperately, Ray shoved a foot in front of the big man, and McGurn hit it and went sprawling on the floor with Ray on top of him.

He felt hands grab him and pull him off of McGurn. He fought to stay where he was a moment, then relaxed. He rolled over in the dust, trying to lift the gun he'd sneaked out of McGurn's holster.

"Figured you was going for Anse's gun," Sheriff Reedy said without emotion. Something cold was pressing against Ray's head. "So just drop it," the sheriff's voice went on in his ear.

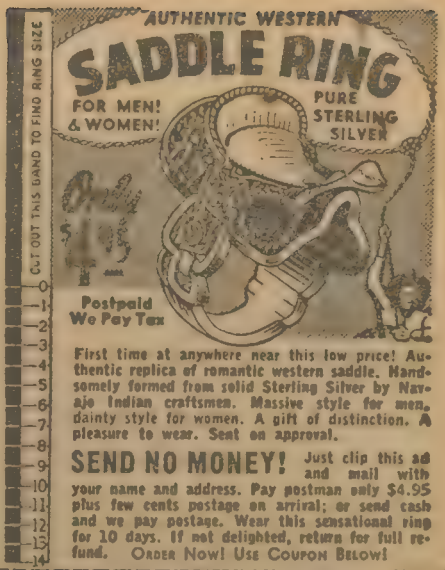
Ray grunted. "You win, Sheriff. Fact is, this is a game I just can't seem to win at. I been losing it, somehow, ever since the start."

"Maybe your luck will change—now."

The whole group whirled around. Martha Dodge had walked up during the melee. There were signs of tears on her cheeks, but she wasn't crying now. Ray grunted and turned his head away.

"Sheriff, may we go into your office?" she asked crisply.

"Shore," the lawman grunted. "Step right inside. You, too, Ray—and no more funny business!"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Martha Dodge turned to Anse. You might be interested in listening to this, too, Anse."

"Yeah?" Anse grunted. "Remember what—"

But the girl wasn't listening. She had stepped into the office. Ray was prodded inside after her. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw Anse McGurn glance worriedly up the street. A number of his newly hired hands were standing up there, thumbs hooked in their belts; watching and waiting.

"You've got something to say, Miss Dodge?" Sheriff Reedy asked.

"Sheriff, are you holding Ray Delbert on the charge of killing my brother?"

"Shore as heck am," the lawman responded promptly.

"Then turn him loose," the girl said. "Instead of a jail sentence, Ray Delbert is due a reward for killing my brother!"

"You addle-pated fool!" Anse rasped. "I told you not to say—"

"Shut up, McGurn. Go ahead, Miss Dodge," Sheriff Reedy said.

"Jamie got in trouble down in Texas—the last time he went down that way. He—he shot a man and there was a price on his head. McGurn knew about it—he went down there to pay off some of Jamie's IOU's and found it out. I don't think Ray Delbert killed Jamie, but even if he did, it—it was no crime, don't you see!"

"I've heard enough," McGurn said and there was an icy quality in his voice. He started moving toward the door. "I warned you not to talk too much, woman."

"If you're planning to go get the crew and—"

McGurn laughed bitterly. He slapped his empty holster. "Maybe I ain't heeled, but one shot'll bring that bunch of mine down here—and damn fast! You've talked too much—so I'm taking over the town now—and the Diamond D—"

Martha Dodge went to the window and looked out. She frowned a little. "McGurn, I fired that crew a few minutes ago. Told them that no matter what they did for you—they'd get no more pay from me. Sheriff, will you send your deputies up there to see that they leave town? They might—"

"Get going, boys, and make sure every last one of them leaves!"

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"There's not much more to tell," Martha Dodge said. "Anse McGurn black-mailed Jamie and me. Threatened to let the law know where Jamie was. His price for silence was that strip of land along Harbor Creek—he planned to make the railroad pay heavy for a right-of-way—"

"And now I'll finish the story," Anse McGurn said quietly. There was an ugly derringer in his big right hand, and an uglier glint in his eyes. Sheriff Reedy gulped and swore softly. He'd holstered his gun as he'd stepped over toward Martha Dodge.

"I had a sweet setup," McGurn rasped, "until you put up a fight!" His eyes blazed at Ray. "She refused to let me raid the nesters, and then finally that damn Jamie got enough backbone to head back to Texas —to give himself up! So I had to kill Jamie, and then go through with my original plan to burn the nesters out."

"I told you I wouldn't keep quiet if you burned the farmers out," Martha Dodge said.

Anse nodded. "Now you gonna wish that you had. I warned you what would happen. You're gonna be my protection till I'm clear of town!" He reached over and grabbed the girl's wrists. He twisted cruelly as he dragged her in front of him. Sheriff Reedy swore in helpless rage; then his voice choked off as Anse swung the derringer. The side of the little gun slammed against the lawman's head and he slumped quickly to the floor.

"Pity the sheriff took that gun away from me," Ray Delbert said quietly. "I could shoot you right now with it."

Anse chuckled deep in his throat. The

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little deringer swung straight toward Ray's face, until he was staring into its black muzzle. He stared into that muzzle, trying to realize that this was happening to him, and not being able to comprehend that in another moment death would hit him. He gripped the edge of the desk. If he'd judged Anse McGurn right, then the big man. . . .

He was! Elation leaped inside Ray. Anse McGurn was taking a minute to gloat at Ray Delbert.

"Look right at that barrel, Delbert!" he chortled. "In just about one minute—"

"I see the barrel all right, McGurn—I felt that gun when I knocked you down—" He tried to keep his words from tumbling out too fast—"That's why I clogged it with dirt—"

"Damn!"

"—It'll explode in your face when you pull—"

That was all he could get out. The next instant he was diving toward the big man. McGurn had lifted the gun to look into its muzzle; then he realized his mistake. But it was too late. He roared a curse and tried to swing the gun. But Ray's fist landed in his face, and he staggered back. Martha Dodge twisted away from him.

Ray dived for the sheriff. His hand had closed around the sheriff's gun, when the office exploded in sound. Something slammed hard into his side; then he had the sheriff's gun free. He fell face forward on the floor, rolling as he fell.

Rolling over and jerking the heavy gun up, McGurn was lifting the derringer for another shot as the gun in Ray's fist exploded. The heavy .45 slug hit the foreman in the stomach.

There was a look of shocked disbelief on his face; then it passed, and he was struggling to get the gun up again. Ray rolled the hammer back and fired again, again—and then once more. He peered through the gunsmoke and saw that his last shot hadn't been necessary.

Martha Dodge dropped down beside him. "Oh, Ray—there's so many things—"

He grinned at her. He grinned and it didn't hurt his battered face. "Yeah, there's a lot of things you'n me have to straighten out—but we'll have a whole lifetime together to git 'em done!"

THE END

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